

Monster Tamer

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Chapter 1: After the Collapse ~Kei's POV~

Several clumps of earth about the size of heads came tumbling down the cliffside. Within seconds, the stream of dirt plunged into the river below with a huge splash, letting loose a pillar of water. The river flowed quickly, rumbling all the while. I stood several meters from the edge of the collapsed mountain road and looked down at the white stream. I could feel the blood draining from my face.

“Wh-Where’s Takahiro...? What about the others? What happened?” I looked around restlessly, but I couldn’t spot most of the people I had been traveling with.

When the Skanda Iino Yuna had suddenly appeared before us, obviously hostile, Mana had directed Gerbera to cause a landslide to get rid of Iino. Following that, Mana had acted as bait and launched a surprise attack with a flash runestone. Her plan had succeeded, but the others had also gotten caught in the falling rubble.

“Calm down, Kei,” my big sister Shiran said when she saw how agitated I was. “You mustn’t panic. At such times, you must properly think things through. It’ll be too late if you make the wrong decision.” Her already stern features tightened into an even more severe look.

“Shiran...”

“It seems we were the only ones to escape the landslide safely.”

Unlike me, Shiran maintained her composure even in emergencies. Her left eye, the one uncovered by her eye patch, looked at the one other person with us.

“It seems so,” Gerbera replied with a nod as she climbed up the cliff using her many legs.

Her entire body was dripping wet. She had jumped down into the river the moment she saw everyone get caught in the avalanche of dirt and rocks. Judging by how she was empty handed, she unfortunately hadn’t found anyone.

“Kuu...”

I heard a whimper and looked down. The small blowfox at my feet dangled her puffy tail dejectedly.

“I see you’re okay too, Ayame,” I said to her. That accounted for everyone here. I bent over to pick up the little fox and held her in my arms. “But weren’t you right next to Takahiro when we fell?”

“It seems my lord tossed her aside,” Gerbera said as she squeezed

the water out of her drenched hair. "I'm sure he did so to get her away from the collapsing rocks. In fact, right before Katou used the flash runestone, I threw one of my threads at him, but I didn't catch anything. He moved a step faster than I did, with some plan in mind."

Gerbera paused there, a slight sense of relief on her face.

"No one was flattened by the rocks. I saw them get washed away by the river. There's no mistaking it."

She had apparently jumped into the river to verify this.

"As for my lord's presence," Gerbera started, looking off into the distance, "it's quite far away now. With these rapids, I suppose it's to be expected."

"Gerbera, should we not be worrying about Mana instead?" Shiran asked. "A landslide like that shouldn't be much of a problem for Takahiro now that he can strengthen his body to a certain extent...but Mana has no powers as of yet. I'm worried."

"Hmm. That's certainly true. I've finished making sure nobody was flattened by the falling rocks, so first we must... Hm? No, wait a minute. Perhaps..." Gerbera suddenly realized something. I wondered what it was as she thought it over for a bit, until she finally nodded. "No. Katou will be all right."

"Huh?"

"Thinking back on it, there were two people unaffected by the blinding flash at the time."

How did that prove Mana's safety? Gerbera didn't elaborate. She got herself up as she wrung out the hem of her clothes.

"Now that we know this, we cannot remain careless," she said. "We must quickly rendezvous with my... O-Oh?"

She staggered slightly. She had lost several of her legs in the fight against Iino Yuna. She immediately braced herself with her remaining legs and turned my way.

"I must rendezvous with my lord and the others. I shall leave Ayame behind to guard Kei, so you two wait here."

"If only I could use high-grade healing magic still," Shiran said with an anxious look.

With Gerbera's natural regenerative abilities, she could have regained her lost limbs in no time with Lily's healing magic or my sister's prior proficiency.

However, during the battle at Fort Tilia, when my sister turned into a demilich, she lost her ability to use healing magic. I could use healing magic too, but I couldn't do anything at the level she once could. With my capabilities, which could barely be called grade 2, it would take some time before Gerbera recovered fully.

"Think nothing of it. I cannot deny that my combat strength has degraded due to these injuries, but I can still scatter the monsters in

this area. There is no need for concern,” Gerbera stated confidently before jumping away.

Possibly because she was a few legs short, she moved through repeated leaps rather than running. Her white figure vanished into the distance quickly. I hugged Ayame against my chest and shut my eyes tight.

Please... Please let those dear to me be safe. Please see that they're unharmed.

All I could do was pray for them.

Chapter 2: Staredown by the Riverside

“That was close...” I mumbled, taking a seat on the riverbed.

A rapid white stream ran before me. It was the same river that flowed beneath the mountain road we had been using. Unfortunately, I had gotten caught in the landslide Gerbera had caused, and even though I hadn’t been injured, I had lost my footing and fallen into the river below. The rapids were fierce, and they had washed me a fair distance away. I was glad Iino hadn’t taken me down, but it would still take a considerable amount of time to get back to where I had been.

I let out a sigh as I listened to the sound of the crackling campfire—I had lit one so that I could dry my soaked clothing. I felt the heat against my bare chest as I turned my gaze away from the river. There were three people crowded around the campfire with me.

“Katou,” I said to one of them.

The girl with pigtails turned my way. She was also drying her clothes, so she had taken her shirt off. Her slender shoulders and the curve drawn by her back as she cradled her knees made it difficult for me to find a place to look, to say nothing of her bewitchingly exposed side. Having said that, I believed I had to say this while looking her in the eyes, so I focused only on her face.

“What is it, Senpai?” she asked.

“Please try to keep the reckless acts to a minimum.”

It was her plan, but Katou had been in the most danger from the landslide. Unlike my servants and I, she couldn’t even manipulate mana, so she could have easily died there. She had acted because she figured she had a good enough chance for survival, but the thought of what would’ve happened had anything gone wrong sent a shiver down my spine.

“But at that point...” Katou started to say, but she stopped when she saw my expression. “Never mind. Understood. I’ll be careful whenever it’s possible.”

“That doesn’t really put me at ease...”

“Tee hee. Sorry,” Katou said with a modest but sweet smile.

“Thank you for worrying about me.”

“Sure thing...”

Even though I tried looking her in the face as much as I could, I

couldn't erase what I'd seen below her shoulders from my mind. Even though Katou was petite, and her chest was quite modest when compared to Lily, I could still see her womanly bulges pressed tenderly against her knees. I averted my face in a fluster.

I can't look at her that way, I told myself. I knew this, but I was still a man. I couldn't keep my eyes from wandering just a little. Rather, it was physiologically impossible for me not to react when we were both half naked. That applied doubly so with a cute girl like Katou. I'd managed to get over my wariness of her, but my reaction to her half-naked body was probably my biggest failure. It was actually better when I saw her as eerie.

"Master, are you cold?" another voice said. I was glad there was someone else to distract me from Katou. "If the fire is not sufficient enough to warm your body, I can go gather some kindling."

"I'm fine."

This was Rose. She turned her masked face toward me, her dull gray hair still dripping. She didn't have to worry about catching a cold, so she was still wearing her wet clothes. Be that as it may, the way the fabric stuck to her hard mannequin body was strangely vivid. Rose was also rather defenseless, and it seemed there was still a lingering feeling in my mind from seeing Katou as a woman.

I let out a sigh and refocused myself. As I did, a deep crack running down Rose's abdomen became visible through the creases in her clothing. It was the damage she'd suffered from Iino's body blow. I knit my brows at the painful-looking wound.

"How about you? Is your body all right?" I asked.

"Combat is still possible," Rose replied.

It was a questionable answer, in my opinion. Still, it was just like her. She was always thinking of how to protect me.

"All the same," she added, "it seems this damage will have some effect on me."

"Well, no helping that."

"I'd like to exchange parts, but our luggage was scattered with the manamobile. If I could at least recover my sack of magic tools... All of my spare parts were in there, including my extra torso."

"Sorry, Rose. It was an emergency. I didn't think that far ahead..." Katou said apologetically, her expression downcast. She had planned the entire landslide.

Seeing her friend shrink into a ball, Rose shook her head. "I've finished analyzing the majority of the sack's contents already. Even if it's lost, I believe I'll be able to recreate them on my own. Besides, it isn't your fault, Mana."

"What...? Are you saying it's *my* fault?" the last person sitting around the campfire said in discontent.

She had glamorous black hair and sharp features, and her slender body belied the extraordinary engine hidden within. This was Iino Yuna, the cheater nicknamed the Skanda. She had lost her prided speed, though. She was sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her. A blood-soaked cloth was wrapped around her left thigh, and her right ankle was fixed in place with a simple brace made out of a branch and some cloth.

“Hey! Majima! Quit ogling me!”

Iino noticed my gaze and knit her delicate brows. Incidentally, she was also in her underwear. I didn’t think a cheater could catch a cold, but she had taken off her wet clothes because they felt gross. She glared at me as I responded with half-open eyes.

“Relax, I’m not interested in your body at all.”

“Wha—?!”

She was fairly flat, but Iino was still beautiful. Her long and slender limbs were graceful. Strangely enough, though, I felt nothing from seeing her in her underwear. It was like I just didn’t care. Well, maybe that made sense. Even though we were gathered around a campfire like this, Iino was our enemy.

We found ourselves in a curious stalemate. The Skanda had temporarily lost her vaunted legs, but that didn’t mean Rose and I could defeat her now. She would just strike us down if we were to attack her.

Conversely, Iino couldn’t attack us with that wound, although I was keeping my distance to an extent and staying on guard, just in case. Besides, even if she caught us, she couldn’t bring us back if she couldn’t walk. Iino couldn’t use healing magic either. Fortunately for us, she was strictly a frontline combatant.

Katou was pretty much responsible for all of this. In that instant when the landslide was about to take her, Katou had used her imitation flash runestone. Iino hadn’t had any time to think. Compounded by the fact that Katou had caught Iino totally off guard at the time, the runestone had completely blinded Iino.

Even though the rest of us hadn’t been blinded to the same extent as Iino had, there were limits to what we could accomplish with minimal vision. Regardless, some had taken action flawlessly—Rose and Asarina. Neither of them viewed the world through eyes. As such, a blinding flash didn’t obstruct them at all.

Thinking back on it, Katou might have suggested this reckless plan to Gerbera precisely because she trusted Rose. She’d been sure that Rose would save her, and that was exactly what had happened.

Rose had protected Katou from the falling rocks, while I’d ordered Asarina to retrieve the two of them. Inevitably, Iino had gotten caught in that too. That was because Katou had picked up her fallen knife,

and when the blinded Iino collided with her, she had stabbed the Skanda right in the thigh.

It was Rose's specially made knife, so it had gone right through even a cheater's muscles. Even though Iino hadn't been on guard, this was still impressive. And with her attention focused on her injured leg, Iino had ended up hurting her ankle when the road collapsed.

Katou really did deserve praise for all this. She was utterly ruthless against her enemies. There was no way of stripping Iino of her combat abilities without doing something this extreme. Katou's judgment had been right on the mark.

"By the way, Senpai. What do we do now?" Katou asked me.

"Let's see..." I folded my arms and thought it over for a moment. "First, we need to meet back up with all the others."

We had gotten separated from our group. From what I could tell before being blinded, Shiran, Kei, and Gerbera had escaped the landslide, judging by where they'd been when Gerbera hurled the manamobile. Also, after I'd figured out Katou's intentions, I had thrown Ayame toward Gerbera. The action was so abrupt that I'd treated her rather roughly, so I had to apologize later.

Lily was the unlucky one. She was always influenced by the structure of whatever body she was mimicking. Not only had the flash blinded her, but she had fallen in the landslide. Something of that level wasn't a threat to a monster like Lily, but she had ended up getting washed away down the river on her own. I could sense she was heading our way through the mental path.

"Let's wait here for Lily. She's got the nose of a wolf, so it'll be faster for her to find us than the other way around. After that, we can meet back up with Gerbera and the others."

Judging by her personality, Gerbera was going to chase me as soon as possible, but her movements would be rather sluggish. She only had a vague sense of direction to go by from the mental path, and she also had several missing legs due to Iino. Shiran and Kei had been with her, but Shiran couldn't use healing magic as an undead monster, and Kei's skill wasn't sufficient to regenerate Gerbera's lost limbs. It was likely Lily would reach us before Gerbera did.

"What do we do after that?" Katou asked.

"Just as we did before. We'll go back to the mountain path and head to Aker."

"Wait just a moment, Majima. Are you planning on running away?" Iino cut in.

I stared at her suspiciously, but she didn't pay it any mind and returned a critical glare of her own.

"Come back to the Empire with me," she said.

Iino had been like this the entire time. It was honestly a pain in

the ass. I didn't want to get involved with her at all, and now that we found ourselves unable to do anything to each other, I wanted to get out of here immediately.

The reason I was crowded around the campfire with her regardless of this was so that I could gather information. We had to talk, or I wouldn't be able to obtain something that was otherwise unavailable to me. I had to speak with her, but only barbed words came out of my mouth.

"Go back to the Empire, you say? There's no way I'll happily tag along with someone who suddenly attacked us."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Iino said with a severe expression. "Hang on... Suddenly attacked you? What do you mean? You were the one to instigate the fight with your pawns first."

"Me? What're you talking about? First, quit referring to them as pawns. Second, you were definitely the one who was blatantly hostile toward us."

"So you suddenly attacked me?!"

"It looked like some random thug was about to kill me. Of course they would jump into action."

"A-A random thug?! What's with that?! There's no way I'd suddenly try to kill you!"

We were talking, but we definitely weren't on the same page. As we stared each other down, a clap resounded in the air.

"How about we start by sharing our circumstances?" Katou said.

Hearing her quiet voice cooled me down a little and stopped the blood from rushing to my head. I also realized I was practically incapable of controlling my emotions right now. Katou gazed at me gently as if to comfort me. I scratched my head awkwardly, took a deep breath, and calmed myself down.

I was pissed that Iino had injured everyone. However, we couldn't have a proper conversation if I lost my composure, meaning I wouldn't be able to get any information. After calming down a little, I thought about what Iino had said before. She had chased us because she was under the impression that I was one of the people who had attacked Fort Tilia.

She was only trying to capture me, not kill me. Now it made sense. In Iino's mind, she had just been tracking a suspect, and once she voiced her suspicions to him, he had attacked her in a frenzy. That was probably her impression, at least. I had my own opinions on the matter, of course, and Iino certainly did too. Well, this all happened because of Iino's misunderstanding. But even without that, we still had an unfortunate difference of opinions.

I let the strength out of my shoulders and sat back down, only just noticing I had unconsciously risen to my feet earlier. "Fine."

Katou gave me a smile, then in a complete change, turned and glared coldly at Iino. "You too, Iino. Don't you find it strange?"

"That's not—"

"At the very least, you can tell that Senpai's servants aren't just mindless puppets, right? Both Gerbera and Lily were desperate to protect him. Did they look like pawns to you?"

Iino groaned as she pursed her lips tightly. She looked like she had suspected this when she was fighting Gerbera. Katou's observation was right on the money.

"Besides, I won't let you say such things about Rose," Katou added with a strange amount of vigor. Perhaps unconsciously, her fingers crept over the hilt of the knife that Rose had made for her.

Seeing that, Iino let out another groan. "I get it already..."

And although she did so rather grudgingly, Iino backed down. We now had the chance to hold a proper conversation.

Chapter 3: Someone I Hate

We started by telling each other about our circumstances so that we could come to a mutual understanding. I told her of what had happened at Fort Tilia two months ago, and about what we had done there. Seeing that Katou and Rose hadn't been present, this role was entirely up to me. Iino looked like she wanted to cut in a few times when I described what her fellow exploration team member, Juumonji Tatsuya, had done, but she did at least hear me out until the end without interrupting.

Next, it was her turn. She started with her journey into the Depths to rescue the remaining students. I wasn't really interested in that part, so I asked her to keep it brief and focused on the details from after she'd returned to Fort Tilia.

"I see. You passed through Serrata," I remarked in the middle of her story, then cocked my head. "You caught up to us awfully fast."

Iino had returned to Fort Tilia a little over a month after leaving for the Depths. Around two months had passed since we left the fortress ourselves, so considering the time she had spent there, Iino had taken around twenty days to catch up with us. Not only that, she had stopped by Serrata and had even gone all the way back to Fort Ebenus to inform the leader of the exploration team. We hadn't been in a rush ourselves, but it was still surprising she had caught up with us in just twenty days.

Iino, on the other hand, didn't see it as a big deal. She casually scoffed at me. "I was accompanied by the Imperial Knights and the students we rescued in the Depths, but after that I was on my own. My legs carried me to Serrata in two days."

"You ran? It's supposed to take a fast horse four days."

"Going from Serrata to Ebenus also took me two days."

"That's the Skanda for you..." I muttered.

The journey from Fort Tilia to the Depths would normally take around a week. It should've taken her at least that long to get back since she was with the home team members she'd rescued. So, deducting those twenty or so days since she left Fort Tilia, that left only about two weeks. Iino said she had only taken six days to go to Serrata, Fort Ebenus, and back to Serrata. Considering that she'd taken ten days to reach us here in the Kitrus Mountains, it had actually taken much longer than one might guess.

I was astonished by this, but I moved things along nonetheless. “So, when you stopped by Serrata, this Louis guy told you I was one of the people who attacked Fort Tilia?”

Louis Bard was the man who led Margrave Maclaurin’s territorial army. He was apparently the cause of this entire misunderstanding. Or maybe, considering his position, it was the man behind him.

Katou looked at us curiously. “The description of Margrave Maclaurin you received is quite different from what we heard...”

“What? Are you saying I’m lying?” Iino said, shooting a glance over to Katou.

“I didn’t say that.”

“So Louis is lying? I only spoke with him for a short while, but he’s definitely a sincere man.”

“No need to snap at us, Iino,” I said, cutting into their conversation. “The girl who told us about him, Shiran, isn’t the type to lie. Who knows which of the two is actually right? Different people will see the same person in different ways.”

Personally, I wanted to believe Shiran, but Iino was being insistent. It was possible that this Louis guy was a fine man overflowing with integrity and that the current situation was nothing but a disaster born of a simple misunderstanding. This was probably what complicated the situation so much. Or maybe he really was a despicable swindler who had tricked Iino. I had no way of knowing, but this wasn’t much of a problem.

The real problem was that Louis...or more specifically, the man behind him, Margrave Maclaurin, thought I was the culprit behind the attack on Fort Tilia. How exactly had things ended up like that?

The commander of the Alliance Knights, who knew of what had happened, was currently being taken to the imperial capital as the one responsible for Fort Tilia’s fall. Maclaurin had been the one to restrain her. Judging from how he and Louis knew about Juumonji and Kudou—regardless of them treating the news like wild and irresponsible rumors—it meant that the commander had told the margrave of what had transpired.

In that case, did it mean he didn’t believe her? It wouldn’t be all that strange. House Maclaurin had a history of discord with the Five Northern Kingdoms, including Aker. Above all else, my ability to tame monsters was difficult to accept in this world. It was actually somewhat inevitable considering that the one other monster tamer, Kudou, was actually the one who had attacked the fortress.

Or perhaps this was a simple miscommunication between Maclaurin and Louis. In any case, it turned out that my decision to head to Aker with Shiran, who would be in extreme danger were she to be captured, had in fact been correct.

No matter how vast Maclaurin's influence was, his reach couldn't extend into the borders of another country. If he tried doing something so overbearing, it could easily lead to war. Then the Holy Order would step in, bringing him to ruin. That was what I'd heard before, at least. So long as we stayed in Aker, I would be out of reach of the margrave who claimed I was Fort Tilia's assailant.

"Majima. If you have nothing to feel guilty about, then you should surrender yourself to the Empire."

The margrave's reach was exactly why Iino's suggestion was absolutely out of the question.

"Setting aside Louis for the moment," she continued, "you said you fought against the culprit behind Fort Tilia's attack, right? If that's actually true, then I believe you did the right thing."

"The right thing..." I repeated with a scowl.

"Yes," she replied with a nod. "So, if that's true, you should return to the Empire and help us with our investigation. By doing so, you can prove your own innocence."

She certainly had a point there.

"But if you're lying," she added, "then I can't leave you at large. In either case, you should come and face a fair trial."

"A fair trial, huh?" I muttered back, looking at her face. I felt like I now had a grasp of the principles that drove her. "In short, it's your job to secure anyone suspicious. Any judgment after that you'll leave to some other appropriate authority."

She wasn't being irresponsible by any stretch. She acted on her own standards, so I couldn't say her way of doing things was necessarily wrong. There were no cops out there who pretended to be judges. They captured those under suspicion of being criminals, investigated them, and put together evidence. Iino thought that that was all she needed to do. In truth, she had tried to suppress us, not judge us. There was just one problem, though.

"But what guarantee is there that it'll be a fair trial?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"This isn't Japan. There's no guarantee, right?"

"That... That certainly may be true," she said with hesitation.

Iino had acted entirely under the assumption that I'd be treated fairly. She dropped her gaze to the ground without objecting. Mysteriously enough, I felt slightly disappointed when I saw her like that. Did Iino come here simply because she hadn't thought things through enough?

"Fine." In complete betrayal of my expectations, Iino immediately raised her head and pierced me with a sharp glare. "In that case, I'll accompany and protect you until a fair judgment can be made. Will that do?"

I was silent. Her tone implied she was completely serious.

“Until then, no matter who it is, I won’t allow them to lay a hand on you,” she continued. “If their judgment is irrefutably suspicious, then I’ll protect you with my very own hands. I promise.”

“Do you even understand what you’re saying?” I asked.

“Don’t look down on me. I said no matter who. That means anyone,” Iino declared.

There was nothing in it for her, yet she didn’t show a hint of hesitation. I couldn’t sense any deceit in her behavior. This was only regarding her claim itself, though. Even if she was serious, she could chicken out when the time came.

However, I recalled what had happened during the landslide. Iino had immediately tried to save Katou. It proved she wasn’t the type to lose her nerve thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of her actions.

There was one other thing too. I glanced over at Katou. At the time, she had used the imitation flash runestone to steal Iino’s vision and stab her in the thigh. Iino hadn’t retaliated. On the contrary, she hadn’t even tried to shake Katou off on reflex. She had fallen down the cliff and into the river with Katou still in her arms.

If the famed Skanda of the Colony had shaken her off violently, it would’ve snapped Katou’s body like a twig. Iino hadn’t retaliated precisely because she knew this. Her behavior on the spur of the moment demonstrated her nature as a human. At the very least, Iino’s intentions weren’t a sham.

It would be unfair of me to treat her statement as mere lip service. Katou had said during their face-off on the mountain road, “Even if we weren’t treated as saviors here, I’m sure you would’ve acted exactly the same.”

In all likelihood, even if Katou hadn’t managed to defeat Iino with her quick wits, we would have had this exact same conversation. If I then raised my distrust toward the Empire, I could see her making the same suggestion to take responsibility and escort me all the way.

Iino Yuna was rather simple-minded and a troublesome burden to me...but she wasn’t someone who got carried away by the flow of events. She had conviction. I couldn’t criticize her for it either. That was because...

“You seem to be misunderstanding something, so let me make it clear,” I said to her as she glared at me. “I didn’t fight Juumonji and Kudou at Fort Tilia because I thought it was the right thing to do. I did it simply because there were people there I wanted to protect.”

Shiran and Kei, whom I had deepened my relationships with, and my best friend Mikihiko had all been at Fort Tilia. It was because I wanted to protect them that I had fought so desperately. I did feel

righteous indignation at all the lives that had been lost, but that wasn't my only driving force, unlike Iino right now. My abilities were far too meager, and I didn't have the luxury of fighting for the sake of justice. It was already difficult enough for me to protect what I wanted to.

That was why I would do anything to protect the girls. If the law of this world bore its fangs at them, then I would become evil. If I ended up as something neither human nor monster, much like Shiran had once warned me about, I wouldn't regret it. That was the path I chose to walk. This was what I had resolved to do the moment I decided to stay with the girls. However...

If I had overwhelming power like Iino did, maybe there would have been another path before me. I could at least have considered the possibilities. I didn't believe my choice was honorable or anything. But what of it? If I could protect everything under the sun with a smile, be it precious to me or not, there would be nothing better. That would be the perfectly virtuous answer, but there was no sense of reality to it. Nevertheless, right here, Iino Yuna embodied that perfect ideal, in a manner of speaking.

"Ooh, I get it. That's why," I said, smiling bitterly as I realized something. I finally figured out why I felt strangely irritated by Iino and why I wasn't able to control my emotions. It was oddly refreshing. "Hey, Iino. It seems I hate you."

"Wha—?!"

I was jealous of her. Someone I hated had hurt the people dearest to me. It was obvious I'd feel irritated.

"What's with that?!" Iino shrieked, looking completely taken aback. She immediately flared up in anger. "Is that why you won't come back to the Empire with me?!"

I shook my head. "No, that's an entirely different matter."

I wasn't such an idiot that I'd let my personal dislike of someone cloud my judgment. Even if I disregarded my feelings and thought about it calmly, going with her to the Empire wasn't even worth considering.

It was entirely possible that if we went back with Iino, she would treat us fairly and without unwarranted contempt. But even the Skanda couldn't one hundred percent guarantee our safety. There was no reason for us to willingly step into danger.

Besides, even if Iino possessed a righteous sense of justice, it was doubtful whether she would protect monsters like Lily. Therefore, my decision was to refuse her proposal. Unfortunately for her, she had to go all the way back to the Empire with nothing to show for her efforts.

"Anyways, shouldn't you be worrying about your own safety?" I asked, stretching my hand out toward my clothes laying atop a rock

by the riverside. They had dried considerably by the fire, so I grabbed them and stood up.

“Hey! Wait a sec!” Iino said in a panic. “Where are you going?!”

“Where do you think? Lily should be here soon,” I replied, putting my clothes on. “I’m getting ready to leave.”

Katou also got up as Rose handed her her clothes. Iino was the only one left sitting.

“You don’t plan on leaving me here, do you?” she said, turning pale.

“Well... What do you think we should do, Katou?” I asked.

Katou’s head popped through her collar, and she blinked in surprise for a moment.

“Let’s see... Iino could probably get down from the mountain in about a week if she tries hard enough, right? I’m sure she can repel any monsters on her own just using her arms.”

“Are you telling me to crawl my way back?!”

“I mean, you’ll attack us if you recover, right?” Katou said, shaking her head.

“Th-That’s not...”

Iino averted her gaze. It was apparently exactly what she was going to do.

Seeing her like that, Katou let out an astonished sigh. “See? There’s no way Majima-senpai can ask Lily to heal you like this, is there?”

“U-Ugh...”

A bitter expression formed on Iino’s strong-willed features. She couldn’t do anything about the current situation. Her shoulders drooped.

“F-Fine. I promise not to capture you or anything.”

“Like we could take your word for it,” Katou replied immediately.

“Wh-Why not?!” Iino’s mouth flapped open and shut like a constricted bird. “I-It’s true! I won’t capture you! I’m not lying!”

“You say that, Iino, but you don’t actually trust Majima-senpai either, do you? It goes both ways.”

“Urgh... That’s true... A-At least take me to the entrance of the mountain. I can use the horse I left there to get back.”

Katou’s cruel responses seemed to come from her dislike of Iino. I smiled slightly at this, then turned around as Lily’s presence drew nearer.

“How much time do you think it’ll take us to bring you all the way back there?” Katou asked.

“H-How much?”

“It’s been over ten days since we started crossing these mountains. We had to stop quite a few times to repair the road, so even if we

don't have to do that, it'll take at least three whole days."

"Th-That long...?"

"How do you not know how long it'll take? You walked here yourself, didn't you?"

"I caught up in half a day once I got to the mountains..."

I listened to the two of them as I waited for Lily to show up. I realized I was feeling somewhat restless and smiled wryly at myself. I knew she was fine, but I couldn't calm down until I saw her face. When was she going to get here? It was about time already.

"Mana, may I say something?"

"What is it, Rose?"

"Sorry for interrupting your conversation. I have something I would like to ask Iino... Oh."

Rose stopped in the middle of speaking. We had settled down by a narrow part of the river. The thickets on the other side rustled as a girl with flaxen hair appeared.

"Lily."

I spoke her name and she gave me a glowing smile. Lily looked me over from top to bottom, then let out a relieved sigh. She then returned my greeting.

"Master."

Her voice was affectionate and filled with an earnest longing. We had only been separated for a short while, but a great sense of reassurance spread through my heart. There was likely a part of me that didn't want to spend a single moment apart from her. These emotions suddenly showed on my face, and I once more realized that I'd fallen in love with her. She was my cute, precious Lily...and there was a boorish lump of metal sticking out of her eye.

"Huh?"

A sword was jutting through the back of her skull. The blade had pulverized her eyeball, and its sharp tip pointed toward me. My thoughts came to an utter halt.

"What...?"

I couldn't understand what I was seeing. What had just happened...?

"Ah."

Lily mumbled and staggered. Her mimicked brain was destroyed. Something yanked the sword back out. I remained baffled as I watched her body crumple to the ground. Her head started reforming right away, but her mimicked nervous system had taken severe damage, so Lily lost consciousness and couldn't get back up.

She didn't even know what had happened to her own body. I didn't know either. If I had to describe exactly what I was seeing, I suppose I would say it was a calamity in the shape of a boy.

“I finally got you back, Miho.”

The boy smiled and spoke in such an innocent voice that one would never think he was the assailant. He had a childish look and an impish air about him. At first glance, his tattered clothing covered by a mantle gave him a seedy look. However, upon closer inspection, his torn clothing was the same as my school uniform, and the sword he wielded was a work of art inlaid with multiple gems.



Lily's fluids trickled down the tip of his blade and fell to the ground. His eyes had an aberrant glitter to them as he watched it drip. He looked so dangerous that anyone who came across him in the middle of the night would avert their face and pretend not to notice him.

He waited for Lily's mimicry to retake its shape, then waved his empty hand. Chains came out of his tattered cuff with a clang. The chains, decorated with minute ornaments, writhed about like snakes and bound Lily in a flash. The boy flicked his wrist, tugging on the chains and bringing Lily toward him.

"I'll protect you properly from now on, Miho."

He hugged the unconscious girl with care, as if handling something extremely fragile.

"It can't be... You're..." Katou muttered hoarsely.

"Wh-What are you doing here, Takaya?!" Iino yelled in agitation.

That was the name of Mizushima Miho's childhood friend, Takaya Jun. The pitiful boy who hadn't been able to protect the girl dearest to him now bared his fangs at us.

Chapter 4: One Attack after Another

Takaya's mantle fluttered in the wind over his tattered blazer. He held a sword in his right hand—the one he had stabbed into Lily's skull—and Lily in his left, her body bound in chains. He wore an innocent smile. He was the deceased Mizushima Miho's childhood friend, the cheater who had left her and Katou behind in a hut so he could head east and contact the first expeditionary force. This was my first time seeing him in person.

“Come on. Let's go, Miho.”

Takaya, already standing on the other side of the river, turned to leave. His expression was warm. It was utterly out of place given the current situation, making it far more unnerving than it should've been.

Lily was unconscious now because of Takaya's attack. At this rate, he was going to abduct her. The moment that thought crossed my mind, I charged forward.

“Wait!” I shouted.

“Don't get in my way,” Takaya coldly declared as he turned around. His eyes were filled with malice.

A chill ran down my spine. The survival instincts I had developed in this world rang warning bells in my head.

“I'm taking Miho back,” Takaya said.

The bejeweled sword in his hand started shining. No glyph took shape, but I could feel the exceedingly powerful mana coming from it on my skin. I reflexively stopped my charge just as the earth at Takaya's feet swelled up.

“A magic weapon?!”

A surge of soil rushed across the river toward us. It carried a fair amount of water in the process, giving it a significant amount of mass. I couldn't get away from it.

“Master!”

The moment before the tide of earth engulfed me, ashen hair spread out before my eyes.

“Rose?!”

Rose had forced her injured body to move and jumped in front of me. She held her shield out before her, taking the raging mass of earth head-on.

“Ugh!”

The equilibrium broke in an instant. An explosion quickly drowned out her shriek, and Rose's body flew away. In the next moment, dirt buried the entire riverside we had been occupying.

"Gah!"

Rose's intervention had managed to weaken the rushing wave's momentum. Having said that, the sheer mass of earth was a threat all on its own. My vision flipped upside down. I couldn't tell left from right. I held my breath and clenched my teeth hard to avoid losing consciousness.

"Whoa?!"

Suddenly, a tremendous force pulled on my left hand. I thought my joints would dislocate, but this got me out of harm's way. My vision still tumbled about, but I could see Asarina stretching out of my left hand, winding herself around a nearby tree. She had been the one to pull me to safety.

"Urk!"

I rolled across the ground pathetically, unable to right myself. I ignored the pain torturing my entire body and got back to my feet the moment I could. I spat out the gravel in my mouth and held my sword at the ready. Yet the follow-up attack I feared would finish me never came. Actually, I couldn't even see Takaya anymore.

"He couldn't have...!"

I quickly ran back to the riverbed. The earth had been overturned, changing the scenery altogether. Takaya wasn't there either, and I couldn't see Lily anywhere.

"Fuck! He got me!"

His magic assault hadn't really had much force behind it. A small amount of earth had spread over a relatively wide area, so it hadn't been enough to finish us. Yet Takaya hadn't attacked while we were thrown off by it.

It had been nothing more than a smoke screen. As far as I could tell, he didn't care if it killed us, but that wasn't his objective. In truth, if Takaya had felt like it, he could've killed us all. He hadn't done so simply because he was prioritizing his goal—Lily's abduction.

Blood drained from my face. I felt hot, yet cold. My emotions welled and became unstable.

"Majima-senpai," Katou said, bringing me back to my senses.

I turned around and spotted Katou sitting in Iino's arms. It seemed she had also managed to avoid the surging wave. She stood up, her legs still trembling. She didn't appear injured.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Y-Yeah. I'm fine. Looks like you got by too."

"Yeah. Iino protected me."

"She did?"

Iino didn't react even as I glanced her way. She was still in a daze from Takaya's sudden arrival and attack. He hadn't cared in the least that Iino was in range. To her, though, he was a fellow exploration team member. She could never have imagined him launching an attack on her.

It was pretty impressive that she had managed to protect Katou with her mind in such disarray. Takaya's magic had been aimed at me, so Iino hadn't been in the direct line of fire. With the power of the Skanda, an injured leg wasn't enough to stop her from protecting a single noncombatant.

"Rose pushed me toward Iino all of a sudden..." Katou said, looking at me with her hands clasped in front of her chest. "Um... Where's Rose?"



We found Rose a short distance away from the riverbed. She was half buried in dirt, so I had to dig her out. Katou wet a small piece of cloth in the river and wiped off Rose's body. Rose lay down and let Katou do as she pleased. She had no choice. Her skirt was flipped up, showing nothing beneath it. Rose had lost her entire lower body. She really had pushed herself earlier, seeing that she had already been injured from Iino's attack. Her lower body was probably buried somewhere around here, but we had no idea where it was.

"I must apologize for my shameful display, Master," Rose said.

"Don't. You did well," I told her.

Rose had leapt into action, ignoring the severe damage to her body. That was why I hadn't suffered any major injuries of my own.

"But if we are to take back my sister..." Rose uttered.

We had to find out where Takaya was, catch up to him, and fight him. Tracking him wouldn't be much of a problem. I was connected to Lily through the mental path, after all. It lost its effect over great distances, but at the very least, I could tell which direction she was in.

The problem was catching up. Takaya's actions proved that he didn't have any intention of facing us in battle. Even though he was carrying Lily, it would still be hard for us to catch up to a cheater actively trying to escape from us.

What's more, even if we did somehow catch up to him, we would then have to fight him. Be that as it may, our forces were already absolutely exhausted from the continuous battles we had endured. We were separated from Gerbera, Shiran, Ayame, and Kei; Rose was seriously damaged; and Katou couldn't fight. The only ones who could face him right now were Asarina and me. No matter how I looked at it, there was no way we could take on a warrior like Takaya.

"What do we do...?" I groaned to myself. At this rate, we couldn't

get Lily back. Impatience overwhelmed me. I felt like vomiting. "Why was Takaya here to begin with...?"

"About that, Master," Rose said. "There was one thing on my mind before this happened."

"What was it?"

Now that she mentioned it, Rose had been in the middle of saying something right before Lily showed up.

"Iino said, 'At least take me to the entrance of the mountain. I can use the horse I left there to get back.'"

"Yeah, she did. What about it?"

"We had to move slower because of our group's size, so it took us nearly two weeks to reach the suburbs of Serrata from the Woodlands. A fast horse could cover that distance in four days, but Iino had managed it in two. Why would she have a horse at the entrance to the mountains?"

I turned around in astonishment. Iino sat there looking up at me. Her expression was stiff. I marched up to her.

"What's going on?" I asked, grabbing her by the collar and glaring at her.

"I-I rode a horse up to that point." Now half-standing on her knees, Iino's face twisted from the pain in her injured leg. "I returned from Fort Ebenus and stopped by Serrata. Louis told me to..."

"And you continued by horse...because Takaya was with you?"

Iino nodded. "By the time I got back to Fort Ebenus to speak with our leader, Takaya had already left the fortress. I caught up to him in Serrata, and then we split up at the entrance to the mountains. It was better to work in numbers when gathering information in the villages, but after getting this far, it was only a matter of giving chase..."

Earlier, when Iino told me the details of her journey, I'd found her speed shocking, but I'd also felt like she had been taking it easy. However, considering Iino's personality, she would take the shortest and quickest route to her objective. The reason she hadn't was because she had to match Takaya's pace.

I stood there dumbfounded by the situation.

"This must be some kind of mistake," Iino said. "I can't believe that Takaya would act like some kind of kidnapper."

"A mistake? You do remember being attacked just now, right?"

"I do... But he's a good kid. He really gives it his all." Iino meekly shook her head. "When he first reached Fort Ebenus, his body and mind were in tatters. Frankly, he isn't particularly strong among the warriors. Going through that vast forest all on his own must've been disheartening. He had to be mentally exhausted. And with the frequent monster attacks, he probably hadn't gotten any real sleep either. Injuries were to be expected, especially because he was in a

hurry...”

I listened to her in silence, holding her by the collar all the while.

“But still, Takaya managed to reach the fortress. The very first thing he said was, ‘Please save Miho. I don’t care what happens to me. Please, hurry and save Miho.’ That’s all. He was completely delirious.”

I could vividly imagine the scene Iino was describing. He had been desperate to save Mizushima Miho, the childhood friend he was in love with. Nothing else mattered. Regardless of how tragic the outcome was, his actions had been noble. I couldn’t agree with her statement that this was some sort of mistake, however. On the contrary, this explained Takaya’s attack on us all the more.

“He really isn’t the type to do that kind of thing...” Iino muttered.

“That’s not a good reason to believe it must have been a mistake, not in the least,” I told her bluntly. I was still gripping her collar.

“Huh?” Iino blinked in confusion.

“Do you truly believe every villain in the world steeps their hands in evil because they want to?”

All people are good people. There are simply mutants among us who are evil. How wonderful would it be if that were the case? Reality was nowhere near that simple. Definitive evil was rather rare. It was pretty much a miracle for it to exist. Depending on the circumstances, anyone was liable to act with animosity toward others.

For example, take the cheaters who brought about the Colony’s fall. I never planned on forgiving them, but I didn’t believe they were genuine villains. Aside from their new supernatural powers, they were normal people. Those powers had spurred their violence.

On the other hand, weakness could bring on mistakes—just like with the other monster tamer, Kudou Riku. Doing the right thing in this rigorous world was much too difficult. Takaya was probably the same. Because he cared for Mizushima Miho so dearly, his actions made perfect sense.

“Takaya was just trying to take his childhood friend back,” I said.

More accurately, he was under the impression he had taken her back. That was Lily, though; it wasn’t Mizushima Miho.

This is the worst, I thought to myself.

The stronger his emotions, the greater the rage and despair would be when he realized his failure. What would Takaya do the moment he found out the girl he had taken wasn’t Mizushima Miho? Any outcome seemed ominous. Just thinking about it chilled me to the core.

“If you had at least told us beforehand...” I said menacingly.

Iino shook with a start. She could sense the anger in my voice. She could easily kill me with a slap if she were so inclined, but here she was, trembling in fear like a normal girl. The moment I realized this, a

portion of my seething mind managed to cool down.

“Goddammit...”

It would have been easy for me to strike Iino in her defenseless state. It would have probably made me feel better too. Still, there was no meaning in doing that. It wouldn't bring Lily back to me. It wouldn't give me a means of taking her back either.

Besides, Iino wasn't here to help me. She wasn't my ally. On the contrary, we were enemies. We had just crossed blades. Even if she had hidden this from me on purpose, I didn't have a reason to blame her for it. Also, knowing of Takaya's presence didn't mean I could've handled his attack. Venting my anger on her wouldn't accomplish anything. I had to calm down.

“Let me ask you something,” I said with a big sigh. “That sword and chain he had, they were magic, right?”

I couldn't even believe this was my own voice. It was so cold from me forcing my emotions down.

“Y-Yeah,” Iino answered timidly, her eyes wide. Perhaps she had been under the impression that I was going to hit her.

“Do you know much about them?”

“Th-The sword is a treasure called the Landslide Blade. It's a magic weapon that can form pillars of earth, a feat around the same level as grade 3 magic. They offered it to the exploration team when we arrived at Fort Ebenus. It's considered the ultimate class of equipment within the Empire.”

“The ultimate class?”

I was rather doubtful that something on the level of grade 3 magic could be considered ultimate, but after giving it some thought, I recalled that this world's people couldn't use anything beyond grade 3 magic. My standards were a little skewed.

Magic weapons weren't as flexible as normal magic, but even if this one only created and sent forth a pillar of earth, doing so with the force of grade 3 magic was outstanding. It had many uses depending on its application, much like how Takaya had used it as a smokescreen.

“But isn't Takaya a cheater? Why does he need it?” I asked.

“Takaya's strength is close combat. Magic is his weak point.”

So Takaya couldn't use much magic without relying on tools. Iino had mentioned that Takaya wasn't all that strong. This information could lead to a valid strategy...as faint as such prospects were.

“The chains were manashackles. Have you heard of them? They're a type of magic tool used to seal a criminal's mana.”

“It's the first time I've heard the name. So that's what they look like...”

The people of this world could destroy a prison cell barehanded if

they had mana. I'd heard that there was a means of sealing that power. It required the target to be unconscious to activate, and it wasn't strong enough to seal the abilities of combat-focused cheaters, but it was more than enough to seal Lily's mana as she was now.

I now knew she couldn't escape on her own. This wasn't very welcome news, but it was better for me to know the whole situation.

"I get the gist of it," I said, letting go of Iino.

I had everything I needed from her. My business here was done.

But Iino wasn't done with me. "H-Hang on, Majima," she said in a panic, falling back on her rear. "What are you going to do?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm going to chase Takaya and get Lily back."

"Are you serious?!"

Iino's complexion changed completely. I shot her a glare. She faltered for an instant, but she didn't stand down.

"Something was clearly strange about Takaya's behavior," she continued. "I'm sure you won't be able to talk him down. It'll likely turn into a fight...a fatal one..."

"Probably. I don't plan on talking it out either."

"What?!" Iino yelled, her eyebrows standing on end. "Do you really plan to fight to the death over some monster?!"

"Some monster, huh?"

Her words were rather cruel, but strangely enough, they didn't irritate me. That was because Iino meant no ill will. She probably hadn't even given it any thought before blurting it out. Her goal here was, at most, to stop two fellow humans from killing each other.

She wasn't really wrong. No matter the reason, people shouldn't engage in mortal combat. Killing someone to take back a monster was insanity. That was a perfectly sound argument...to humans viewing us from the outside.

"She might just be a monster to you, but she's precious to me. It doesn't matter whether she's a human or a monster."

All I wanted was for those dear to me to be safe. That was all. I didn't care about doing what was right. Iino and I were on two totally different pages.

Iino was at a loss for words, but she still tried to stop me. "I-If you hadn't fed Mizushima to that monster to begin with, this would never have—"

"Yeah. You're right. I can't refute that no matter who criticizes me for it. But that has nothing to do with this."

She was absolutely right. If I hadn't fed Mizushima Miho's body to Lily, Takaya would've never committed this act of violence. But Takaya was the one who had lost Mizushima Miho, not me. She was dead because of Takaya's mistake.

"Above all else... No matter the reason behind it, I'm not going to

stand idly by while he steals my girl from me.”

“Let me ask you one last thing,” Iino said, casting her eyes down. She knew the battle was inevitable now. There was no strength left in her voice. “Did you kill Mizushima Miho?”

“No,” I answered immediately. “Not that you’d believe me.”

“I...”

“If you can’t take Senpai’s word for it, shall I vouch for him?”

Katou cut in. She was nestled up against Rose and glaring coldly at Iino. “Majima-senpai didn’t kill her. If he did, do you really think I’d be with my friend’s murderer like this?”

“In the same vein...you’re going around with the guy who fed your friend’s body to a monster and stole her appearance.”

“You’ve got a point there.”

Katou scowled and looked at the ground. She clenched her fist over her chest, perhaps a little hurt by Iino’s statement.

“But we’ve been desperate to survive ever since the Colony’s fall,” Katou continued. “There was no way to remain innocent in such a situation.” She looked back up, the strong light in her gaze causing Iino to gulp. “At the very least, anybody who wasn’t there doesn’t have the right to say anything about it. Mizushima-senpai is pretty much the only person who can be angry about it.”

“She’s dead, though...” Iino just barely managed to squeeze out.

For some reason, Katou smiled ever so slightly. “Yes, she is. She died. She can no longer smile or get angry. But I don’t believe she would be angry over this.”

“What? Why?”

“Back when we quarreled with Gerbera...” Katou stopped there, shaking her head. “No. It’s better not to say anything without any proof. More importantly, Majima-senpai, getting Lily back is our obvious priority. It’s useless to go on your own. We need to think of a way to handle this.”

“I know...”

No matter how much I steeled myself, it wouldn’t fill the gulf between Takaya and me. We had managed to get some information out of Iino, but that was nowhere near enough to put me on his level. I wanted to chase after him right away, but that would be foolhardy. I had no choice but to get back to the mountain path for reinforcements. But would we be able to make it in time like that?

“Master,” Rose suddenly said, still lying down without a lower body. “Gerbera’s here.”

“What...?”

Before I could process what she was saying, a shadow fell from the sky. It was hope in the form of a giant white spider.

Chapter 5: Giving Chase

“Gerbera!” I yelled, my voice livelier at the sight of the flying white shadow. “You’re here!”

“Indeed. I see you’re safe and sound, My Lord. That is splendid.” Gerbera looked at everyone present and squinted her red eyes. “But from the looks of it, something has happened.”

She turned back toward me, and I gave her a nod. “Yeah, I need your strength.”

The faintest glimmer of hope had appeared within this hopeless situation. This was Gerbera we were talking about. She probably hadn’t been able to sit still and wait, so she had chased us down here after the landslide. The reason it had taken her some time to reach us was presumably because of her injuries.

The wounds she had sustained in the battle against Iino hadn’t healed yet. Of her eight legs, only two remained on the left and three on the right. Gerbera had dug her talons into the ground to stabilize herself, but she’d still staggered upon landing.

It was better than not being able to move at all, but her prided mobility was effectively impaired. Nevertheless, Gerbera was my strongest servant. At the very least, the probability of retrieving Lily was far greater with her here than trying to do it on my own.

To be honest, I would’ve liked Shiran with us as well, but unfortunately she was nowhere in sight. She was probably waiting with Kei at the site of the landslide. We didn’t have the leisure to go all the way back there, though. I could tell through our mental path that Lily was getting farther away by the minute. Her presence felt more and more distant. It was possible that, before long, I wouldn’t be able to sense her anymore.

There was no way anybody could’ve predicted Takaya’s attack. Even just having Gerbera here was extremely fortunate.

“I’ll tell you what happened on the way. Follow me,” I told her.

“Mm-hm. Very well.”

So long as there was the faintest possibility, I couldn’t sit here doing nothing. I broke out into a dash as Gerbera followed in bewilderment.

“M-Master?!” Rose called out from behind, astonished.

“Don’t worry!” I yelled back, not even sparing the time to turn around. “I’ll definitely bring Lily back!”

Despite saying it myself, I knew full well how hard it would be to accomplish. However, giving up was out of the question, so my only choice was to do the best I could. I had to push myself to my very limits. Thus, I clenched my fist and ran.



Lily's abductor seemed to be heading toward the imperial border. With the mental path, I could sense Lily's presence approaching the southeast of the Kitrus Mountains. Takaya wasn't using the meandering mountain path. Instead, he was using his physical strength as a cheater to travel over the mountain itself.

This appeared to be a precaution against pursuit. He was being rather careful. I could tell Lily's general location thanks to the mental path, but without it, it would have definitely been a huge ordeal just tracking him.

To put it another way, we were acting against his expectations. He probably thought that we'd take the mountain path, or that we'd be unable to track him. It would be rather hard for him to cross over the mountains while carrying Lily, meaning we had to settle things before he cleared them. We had to catch up to him somehow.

"Wait a moment, My Lord. Could you explain what's going on already?" Gerbera said impatiently, hopping by my side.

It was only then that I remembered that I hadn't told her anything yet.

"O-Oh. Right. Sorry. I'll tell you now. After the landslide..."

I briefly explained everything that had happened since then.

"I see. So Lily has been taken."

"We're definitely getting her back. Please lend me your strength."

"Of course," Gerbera answered with a reliable nod. "I shall do anything I can."

"I'm grateful for that."

"Having said that, I'm not in great condition. I'm not sure how much use I'll be..."

"I think you should be fine." I forced a smile on my stiffening face and turned to Gerbera, maintaining my speed all the while.

"According to Iino, Takaya can't use magic. Even as a warrior, he isn't supposed to be all that strong. We should be able to find an opening we can take advantage of."

I tried to compose myself as much as possible and get a grasp of the situation. Even now, anxiety boiled in my heart, making me want to scream. Panicking would get us nowhere, though. I needed to be calm. Nothing could be accomplished if I lost my presence of mind.

"He's got a bunch of magic items," I continued, "but so long as we can do something about them, we should win. Well, not if I were on

my own, but you're here now. There should be plenty of ways to handle this."

"I'm happy to hear you say that, but you know..."

Gerbera seemed to have mixed feelings about this. She looked at me with anxious red eyes.

"What?" I urged her on.

"Perhaps this is just my imagination," Gerbera started, shaking her head and looking at me once more. "What is this Takaya's objective in the first place?"

"To get Mizushima Miho back...right?" I was a little bewildered by her question; the answer was obvious. "Takaya was Mizushima Miho's childhood friend. He braved the Woodlands all on his own just for her sake. She was precious to him. What else could his objective be?"

"Are you being serious, My Lord?" Gerbera said, still running by taking small leaps. "So why did Takaya attack his precious Mizushima Miho?"

"That's..." I started, surprised by her question, "a really good point."

Takaya had stabbed Lily through the head. Anyone else would have died from that. There were other ways he could have stopped Mizushima Miho from resisting. Actually, even that seemed strange now that I thought of it. Why would Takaya think she would resist him? There was no need for a surprise attack. He could've just spoken to her normally. And yet Takaya had snuck up on her and struck her from behind. Not only that, he had done so by stabbing her right through the head.

"What's going on...?" I wondered aloud.

"Come now, My Lord," Gerbera said, knitting her thin eyebrows together and giving me a sidelong glance. She seemed strangely serious. "That little girl just now, Sandra or something, I think?"

"Skanda. Her name is Iino Yuna."

"Right, that. Do you remember the first thing the little girl said when she appeared before us?"

Despite the continuous chain of shocking events, it had only happened moments ago, so of course I remembered.

"She asked us, 'Did you feed Mizushima to the monster you're manipulating,' right?"

Gerbera nodded. "Exactly. That little girl already knew Lily's true identity. This Takaya fellow who abducted Lily was with her, wasn't he? That means we can assume he knew as well."

Now that she mentioned it, that made a lot of sense. Takaya's actions fit in line with him knowing of Lily's identity beforehand. The manashackles he had on him wouldn't work on an unwilling target. Unlike Mizushima Miho, rendering a monster like Lily unconscious

required issuing major damage. To that end, the best approach was to strike at her mimicked cranium. It seemed rather crude at first glance, but it was the most efficient way of binding her.

“But there’s still something strange about this,” Gerbera continued. “He knew Lily was a monster borrowing Mizushima Miho’s form, yet still abducted her. This part doesn’t make any sense.”

“Even disregarding that... He was calling her Miho. He also said, ‘I’ll protect you properly this time.’ It didn’t look like an act to me.”

What was going on? He wouldn’t have said that if he knew it wasn’t actually Mizushima Miho before him. But if it had been her, he wouldn’t have secured her in such a violent way.

“Maybe...”

I suddenly thought of a possibility and grimaced.

“I finally got you back, Miho.”

I recalled his voice. It had been the very definition of naive innocence. In contrast, his actions had been ruthless. I had felt the malice from the aberrant look in his eyes.

“Takaya might’ve lost it...”

It was a little late, but that was my conclusion.

“Lost what?”

“His mind. Takaya Jun was in love with his childhood friend Mizushima Miho. That’s why he was so desperate to save her no matter what. And then he lost her. It’s understandable he’d go insane from that.”

A chill ran down my spine as I spoke. An image I didn’t want to see came to mind, of someone more important than myself—a girl precious and dear to me. That was how I viewed Lily and how Takaya viewed Mizushima Miho. That was why I could easily picture it. If I were to lose Lily, could I retain my sanity? I panicked and brought my thoughts to an immediate halt. I couldn’t think of that in this situation. Doing so might lead to it actually happening.

“I see,” Gerbera said. “So this Takaya fellow may no longer be able to distinguish between Mizushima Miho and Lily. But is that not a cause for relief?”

“Huh...?” Her words brought me back to my senses. “What?”

“Keep it together, My Lord. Are you all right?”

“Y-Yeah. Sorry. I’m fine. What do you mean by ‘relief?’”

“You fear that Takaya will find out that Lily isn’t Mizushima Miho and cause her harm, correct?” Though she seemed kind of puzzled, Gerbera suddenly looked at me comfortingly. “But that possibility is gone now, isn’t it? Takaya already knew Lily’s identity when he abducted her.”

“Y-Yeah...”

When she put it like that, it did seem true. But I still didn’t feel

any relief from it. Logic rarely conquered such emotions.

“You have a point,” I replied with a small nod.

We ended our conversation there and proceeded in silence. I could see the sun flickering in the corner of my vision. Dusk was approaching. I felt a prickling on the back of my neck. How much time had passed since Lily had been abducted? How much distance had we managed to make up? Were they actually getting farther away from us? Things kept racing through my mind that I couldn’t do anything about.

“Hm?” I murmured, only realizing that Gerbera had been examining me after several minutes of silence. “Something wrong?”

“My Lord...”

Gerbera dug her talons into the ground, skidding to a sudden stop. I followed suit and stopped too.

“Ah!”

I lost my balance, pitching forward and nearly falling over. I tried to right myself and stop myself from falling, but I failed. One of my hands slammed against the ground. A shiver of pain ran up my arm. I had nearly sprained my wrist.

“Haah... Haah...”

I realized my breathing was ragged. My heart pounded in my chest. A dizzy spell assaulted me as I stood back up. I shook it off and turned around.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Gerbera stood behind me. Clouds of dust were coming up from where she had dug her talons into the ground. Her long hair was covering her face because of the sudden halt in momentum, hiding her expression.

“I take it back,” Gerbera muttered. “It seems this isn’t my imagination at all.”

Chapter 6: Entangled by Spider Threads

“It seems this isn’t my imagination at all.”

Gerbera raised her head. Her long white hair parted, revealing a face so beautiful it could put a goddess to shame. My heart thumped. There was an aggressive air to Gerbera’s expression. I nearly averted my eyes, an awkward sensation running through me, but once I realized this, I faced her directly.

“What is it?” I asked.

My throat hurt slightly. It was scratchy and dry. I tried swallowing some saliva, but it got caught in my throat through my ragged breaths. I coughed lightly before continuing.

“Actually, if we’re going to talk, let’s do it while—”

“Earlier, when I found you, did you not notice I was approaching?” Gerbera said, cutting me off. Her strong gaze remained fixed on me.

“Huh?”

I hadn’t noticed her approach? What did she mean?

“It looked like Rose noticed,” Gerbera added, ignoring my confusion.

“What’s this about?” I asked, my voice a little sharp at the sudden nonsensical topic when we were in a hurry. Anybody else would have done the same. “Is this something we have to stop to talk about?”

“I have judged it to be so, yes.”

Gerbera didn’t stand down, reproaching me with a strong tone. Her red eyes didn’t waver at all; they reflected my image perfectly.

“Do you—?!”

The awkwardness of the situation escalated, and irritation began to rear its head. The urge to scream, “Do you really understand the situation?!” welled up from the depths of my soul. Lily was getting farther and farther away while we stood idle here. Now wasn’t the time for this.

“Don’t you get it, Gerbera? This is an emergency,” I said instead, barely managing to suppress my emotions. Regardless, I couldn’t stop my voice from trembling. “I can’t save Lily on my own. Just as I’ve been saying, I need your strength. I need you to work with me here.”

Without combining our strengths, it would be impossible to get Lily back. I couldn’t do it alone. Lily had taught me that I should live

as a master. It was my way of joining hands with my servants and helping each other out, especially in a crisis like this. It would be absurd to erupt at Gerbera and cause discord between us. I had to calm down. I restrained myself, repeating these words in my head over and over.

“So it really must be Lily...?” Gerbera said sadly, biting her lip.

“What?” I knit my brows. “What are you saying? Don’t you want to get her back too?”

As far as I knew, the two of them got along well. Their actual ages were extremely far apart, but Gerbera adored Lily as her older sister. There was no way any of that was for show.

“Are you maybe implying...I’m only this desperate because it’s Lily?” I asked, raising the first possibility that came to mind. “If so, you’ve got it wrong. I’d act the same way if it were you.”

This didn’t only apply to Gerbera either. I would do this for any of my servants.

Gerbera, however, shook her head. “I wonder about that.”

Her expression was unlike her. Her smile looked almost cynical. Her attitude brought back my irritation, but seeing her face blew away all of my impulsive urges.

“I don’t believe that to be the case.”

“Gerbera...?”

“If any of us but Lily were abducted...then she would be the one here by your side.”

The only thing I could feel from her voice was a sense of helplessness. She stepped up to me unsteadily on her five remaining legs. Her swaying and unreliable gait made her look like a flower beaten down by heavy rain.

“You said that you require my strength... Indeed, that makes sense. We cannot take Lily back without working together,” she continued, staggering, but with her eyes fixed on mine. “But is strength all you require?”

I was at a loss for words.

“That’s not what working together means, is it now?”

She grabbed my shoulders. Gerbera’s beautiful face was now close enough for me to feel her breath. She frowned, bitterly biting down on her lip.

“What’s with that face?” I asked.

“I should be saying the same to you.”

She was right. I could see the image of a worn-out and impatient boy in her blood-red eyes. That was me... I looked horrible.

“Don’t carry all of your worries on your own. Don’t keep your unease to yourself,” Gerbera said, shaking my shoulders. “You may not have realized it, but you have lost all your composure. You

overlooked many things even I could notice. That is proof above all else.”

I had thought of somehow meeting up with Gerbera, yet I hadn’t noticed her approach. I had completely overlooked that Takaya knew Lily’s identity beforehand because he was traveling with Iino. These points were so easy to see, yet I hadn’t seen them. There were likely other things I still failed to notice. And given the current situation, I couldn’t even tell what mistakes I was making. There was no way of describing myself other than pathetic.

“I thought I was being calm...” I mumbled.

“You aren’t that strong, My Lord.”

Gerbera was right again. I felt guilty for feeding Mizushima Miho to Lily. Takaya had committed the abduction, but I blamed myself, wondering if it was my fault that he had lost his way. I wasn’t so strong a person that I could remain calm while carrying such a burden on my own.

The moment I acknowledged this, the fatigue I had been feeling this entire time grew even greater. To be more precise, I finally felt the fatigue that had been plaguing me throughout this whole ordeal.

Before I knew it, I had gotten too obsessed with the chase. I was pushing myself far beyond my limits. Just as Gerbera had said, the odds of Lily being harmed were rather low. It would be ridiculous to panic and put my all into tracking him, only to fully exhaust myself before we even caught up to them. That was why Gerbera had stopped.

I reflected on my pathetic behavior. I had failed miserably at applying what Lily had taught me. I spoke of working together but didn’t actually do it, despite having done so before. How could I make such a mistake after all this time?

“If Lily were here, I’m sure there wouldn’t be a problem,” Gerbera said, answering the doubts in my mind. “You would’ve been able to express your worries to her. But Lily was abducted. Unfortunately, I am the only one here.”

“It’s not unfortunate or anything...”

“There’s no need to console me. I know that Lily is beyond special to you.” I tried to say something, but Gerbera shook her head and cut me off. “Your first servant. The one closest to your heart. Conversely...it means the rest of us are slightly more distant.”

I couldn’t say anything to that.

“That’s why...” Gerbera continued, “I haven’t thought of anything as arrogant as being Lily’s substitute. Sharing an embrace, understanding each other, having your hearts melt as one... That is the privilege of your lover, Lily. I’m insufficient to serve in this role. Thus, I won’t ask you to cling to me. I won’t ask you to return my embrace. I

can't ask these things after my feelings have been left unanswered all this time. Of course, I won't use that as an excuse to ask for an answer now either."

Gerbera's hands slipped down my shoulders and wrapped around my back. Her embrace was as light as a feather, yet it was like she was binding me wholly.

"But could you please at least lean on me? Remember? You did so once before, right?"

She was referring to that moment we had spent exploring the forest together. After succumbing to my trauma over the events at the Colony, I had simply leaned against her. Now she was asking me to do this once more.

"If I can get even the smallest portion of your heart to feel at ease, then that is more than enough for me."

The warmth of her body, the emotions coming through our mental path—all of it melted away my anxieties. It felt like Gerbera's heart was wrapped around mine... Why was I reminded of the time I first met her, when she was but a white arachne without a name?

It had been a meeting full of sorrow. Or perhaps "encounter" was a better word for it. She had abducted me and brought me back to the arachne nest. Exposed to the white torrent of her emotions, her color had entirely painted me over. It felt like my heart would break. I had been like a bug, bound and captured within spider threads.

"I want to ravish you, My Lord."

Her gentle embrace now was totally different from those violent shackles. Gerbera was trying to support my weakened heart. The affection I felt from her was pure, wholehearted, and very warm.

Nevertheless, Gerbera was still a spider by nature. This situation reminded me of that fact. After all, it felt like she had "captured" me. I felt it much more strongly than when she had taken me to the arachne nest. I was helpless, bound hand and foot.

"You really are inattentive sometimes, Gerbera..."

"My Lord?"

"You're in no way insufficient," I said, giving her a slight smile. She stood there blinking in a daze as I wrapped my arms around her back. "I merely thought that if I held you too close, I could no longer hold back my feelings."

Until now, I had been strongly influenced by my sense of fidelity, brought from my own world. I didn't really have any particularly strong beliefs or fixations on it, though. The relationship I had with my servants didn't exist in that world, so I was starting to feel like I couldn't remain as I was. I had to face these girls accordingly. They were more precious to me than anything else.

And yet those ideals had continued to influence me. Maybe I

feared too excessive a change. I had lost many things. I had been forced to change regardless of my own intent. That was possibly why I had tried to retain one unchanging piece of me from that world.

My fear had locked my heart. However, it was about time for that to end. I embraced Gerbera. Her body, which hid a terrifying amount of strength, was daintier than mine. Her white skin was so smooth and soft I felt like I could sink into it.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting.”



And just like that, I found myself entangled in white spider threads. I couldn't get away anymore. I had no intention to. At the same time, one of the fetters that had been restraining me had come undone. I was sure to change, living in this foreign world with the girls I found so precious. And for better or worse, I could no longer stop this change.

“Fwaaaaah?!”

Gerbera suddenly shrieked. It surprised me, but I didn't release my hold and instead stared up at her face. The arms she had wrapped around my back were now up in the air. Her legs skittered about restlessly. She was still missing some legs, though, so this caused her balance to crumble.

“Wh-Wha—?!”

I fell to my knees with Gerbera still in my arms. Her bright red face was right before my eyes. She was so endlessly cute. Her mouth flapped open and shut several times, unable to express any words, before she finally managed to squeeze something out.

“Th-That surprised me.”



“That’s my line. What’s wrong?”

I thought she’d be happy. Her reaction was somewhat unexpected.

“N-Nothing. I-I mean, I’m certainly happy, but...”

So she was happy...but what? I probed her curiously with my gaze.

“I’m far too happy,” Gerbera answered, her arms still high up in the air, “so I felt like I’d carelessly squash you in my embrace.”

“That’s kind of frightening.”

It was the first time I’d ever heard the sound splat applied to an embrace. Maybe my response was a little *too* effective. Her red eyes, which had been transfixed on me and had kept me from escaping until now, were now swimming about erratically.

“What do I do? What *should* I do? I’m too stimulated. I don’t think I can control my strength.”

That was a bad joke. Or at least I hoped it was. Judging by how her legs were plowing through the ground, maybe it wasn’t. I let go of Gerbera with a sigh.

“I suppose we’ll wait until you can suppress your strength before hugging...”

“A-Aaaargh...”

Gerbera let out a cute groan, and her shoulders slumped. She seemed as if she wanted to protest, but she knew it was her own fault. I felt a smile coming to me. Before this, I would’ve backed off here, deciding nothing could be done about it, however...

“Uhyah?!”

Gerbera let out a strange yelp as I hugged her properly this time.

“U-Ummm, My Lord?!”

“You’re too flustered.”

I smiled wryly and kept my arms around her. I was already a captive of her threads. It was impossible to escape now. But now that this had happened, I had no intention of letting her get away either.

“When we get Lily back and things have calmed down, let’s find some time to be alone.”

“D-Does that mean...a tryst?!” Gerbera yelled, her red eyes shooting open.

“Aah...well, something like that.”

You don’t really have to pounce at the thought... She had been enduring it all this time, so maybe I was partially to blame. In any case, she was really frank about it. Depending on the person, they were likely to draw back from such behavior. The fact that I found it cute probably meant I was beyond hope.

“Th-Then, at that time, s-smooch! I’d like to try that!” Gerbera shouted.

“A kiss?” I asked to be sure. Gerbera nodded vigorously. I gave it some thought and said... “Sure.”

Thinking of the difficulties to come, a small reward was appropriate.

“R-Really?! You promise?!”

“Yeah, it’s a promise. So, for that to happen...”

“Mm! We must get Lily back!”

I let go of Gerbera and backed off. I tried clenching my fist. I could feel my nerves right to my fingertips. I had recovered about eighty percent of my stamina. Thanks to Gerbera, my mental state was back to normal. I wouldn’t make any stupid mistakes now.

With our determination renewed, I stretched my hand out to Gerbera. She took it with a smile. How strange it was. Something felt totally different now. The physical distance between us was the same as always, but it felt like we were far closer. Just that thought made it feel like strength was surging through my body.

“Okay, let’s get going.”

And just as we were about to continue our chase...

“How beautiful it is to see you getting along.”

Another voice resounded through the desolate forest in the middle of the remote Kitrus Mountains.

“My Lord!”

Gerbera immediately moved to protect me, standing between me and the voice.

“Still, I do believe that one spider still leaves you short on hands, don’t you think?”

Gerbera glared at the slender shadow as it came out from behind a tree.

“If you’d like, shall I lend you a hand?”

I could hear a panting beast next to the voice. An army of shadows oozed out from the shade of the trees. My eyes widened as I watched the boy reveal himself.

“Kudou Riku...”

“It’s good to see you again, Senpai.”

The other monster tamer, leading a two-headed wolf and an army of shadows, flashed me a smile.

Chapter 7: Two Possibilities

Kudou and I faced each other, both of us with monsters in tow. I had known we'd meet again one day, but I never imagined it would happen like this.

"It's good to see you again, Senpai."

Kudou greeted me like a close friend, a smile spread wide across his slender face. I didn't say anything in return. Our relationship wasn't one where we could just smile and have a chat.

He was the other monster tamer. We shared the same origin, but we walked different paths. I chose to use my ability to establish an emotional bond with monsters, whereas he chose to use his to subdue monsters into his service by collaring them. We were entirely incompatible.

The phrase "Misfortune never comes singly" came to mind. Things were already beyond my control, and now Kudou had shown himself. Perhaps he had appeared *because* of this. He had come to take advantage of my predicament.

"My Lord..."

Gerbera unreservedly gripped my hand, hard enough for it to hurt. It wasn't very feminine, but it suited her and was rather reassuring.

"Thanks, Gerbera," I said, letting the tension out of my body. "I'm fine now."

"Mm."

Now that I'd calmed down, I began thinking about what was going on. Seeing how Kudou had struck up a conversation, it didn't seem like he was going to attack us right away. In that case, maybe we could simply pass him by.

Kudou cheerfully gazed at our joined hands, whereas I glared right back at him.

"Long time no see, Kudou."

It had been about two months. He was the same as when we had parted...or possibly a little skinnier. Maybe my impression of him had merely changed because he was wearing the local clothing. Two months had also passed for him, after all.

I looked over to the monsters accompanying him. They had also changed a considerable amount. The doppelqueen Anton who had spawned this army of shadows wasn't here, but the two-headed wolf

Berta now had tentacles stretching out of her lower back.

Berta was a mutated species of the firefang, a beast native to the Depths. Was this degree of grotesque transformation a characteristic of this monster? Or was this a result of these monsters devouring each other in a practice Kudou had referred to as the “kudoku poison jar”?

“It looks like you’ve been rather busy,” I said.

Kudou smiled and nodded. “Yes, I suppose I have been. I have a goal to accomplish, after all.”

“A goal, huh?”

Repeating his words left a bitter taste in my mouth. His statement from two months ago came back to mind.

“I’m the Demon King. I’m not the one to save humanity. I’m the one to destroy it.”

He had been oppressed and tormented. He had lost all his dignity and, to top it all off, had been teetering on the verge of death. Having gained the ability to manipulate monsters, he considered himself the Demon King, a being meant to enact revenge on humanity. Strangely, those inhuman thoughts were the only things maintaining his sense of self. He could no longer live any other way.

Kudou had likely spent the last two months continuously working toward that goal. One such fruit of his labor stood before me in the form of his servants, who were the best among all those he manipulated.

“There are some here you have yet to meet, Senpai. Allow me to introduce you. This is the dirty sludge Caesar.”

Something green and muddy slithered out of Kudou’s sleeve. I had never seen this type of monster before. She didn’t seem to be native to this region. The fact that he’d gone out of the way to name her meant she was at least a rare monster.

“And this is the nightmare stalker Dora.”

Kudou urged the girl next to him to step forward.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Second King,” she said, taking a bow.

She was like a shadow. Her hair, skin, and eyes were all black. She resembled the army of doppelgangers behind Kudou, but unlike them, her features had more definition. Her appearance was clearly inhuman, but she was also the most human among Kudou’s servants.

“Dora is my mutant spawn.”

One of the doppelgangers took on the shape of a tall, sturdily built boy and spoke. It was Juumonji Tatsuya. This doppelganger was a terminal, so to speak, of the doppelqueen Anton, who could enact her will through it. Unlike the real Juumonji, the boy’s face was horribly robotic.

Anton placed her hand on Dora’s shoulder. “This thing doesn’t

have a single ability as a doppelganger. It's defective and can't serve as my terminal. Instead, it's highly skilled in combat... Perhaps it could even kill you in your current weakened state, White Spider."

"Thank you for the courteous greeting. As a token of appreciation, would you like to put that to the test?"

Gerbera and Anton stared each other down as the air between them turned tense. Watching them, Berta raised one of her heads.

"Stop that, Anton. You stand before our king."

"I know."

Anton's Juumonji-spawn shrugged and backed down. Gerbera let out a snort, and Dora closed her black eyes.

"It seems you're all done with your greetings," Kudou said, glancing at the brief squabble between our servants before looking at me. "I must apologize for not showing myself immediately despite your predicament, Senpai. The Skanda Iino Yuna is here, after all."

Iino had chased me all the way here thinking I was Kudou's accomplice. If she knew he was here, she would definitely knock him out—without mercy. He had only appeared now because Iino couldn't move.

"Hang on... Why do you know about my predicament?" I asked. Things were starting to make sense, but I still found this rather strange. "How did you get here to begin with? Don't tell me you had one of your monsters following me around all this time or something."

"I'm no stalker."

"I wonder about that..." Gerbera muttered quietly, but Kudou paid her no mind.

"I learned of your situation in Serrata. I heard some suspicious stories while gathering information there. I happened to get intel on the Skanda too, so I followed her trail. Luckily, she was using a horse instead of running on her own, so it wasn't all that hard to tail her."

"I see. So that's what happened."

I was convinced now, but one detail stuck out to me. One of the things Kudou had apparently been doing over the last two months was gathering information. Just like me, he had trouble moving around while in the company of monsters.

Still, he had a servant who could slip into human society. The doppelqueen Anton's many spawns could imitate the outer appearance of humans. She didn't need to predate a target before taking on its shape like Lily did. Considering how Anton could control her spawns remotely, she would be perfect for gathering information.

Maybe the reason Anton's main body wasn't here was because she was in the middle of doing just that. There was probably a maximum distance for her remote control, but it was still sufficient in her absence. Or perhaps all of Kudou's strongest monsters, aside from

those who were here, were with Anton performing some other task.

"I understand your story now," I said, addressing the real issue at hand. "But why did you go out of your way to chase me down?"

"Oh? I do believe I already told you."

I scowled at Kudou. He had, in fact, mentioned why he was here the moment he showed himself.

"You'll lend me a hand to save Lily?"

"Yes. I came here to help you, Senpai," Kudou said, smiling broadly. He paid no mind to my suspicions. "I heard what happened. Takaya abducted your precious slime, right? As long as you're okay with it, I'll lend you my servants to add to your forces."

"Do you understand what that would mean...?"

Our opponent was a cheater, the warrior Takaya Jun. This wasn't some mock battle; our lives would be at risk. It wasn't a situation where he should just casually lend out his servants to me. However, Kudou easily consented.

"Of course. I don't mind if you use them as your arms and legs against Takaya," he said, not a hint of hesitation in his voice. "If you're so inclined, you may even use them up and throw them away."

He spoke as if he were talking about expendable goods. Or maybe he truly did see them as nothing more than disposable beings. The way he regarded his servants was totally different from how I regarded mine.

Back at Fort Tilia, Kudou had sacrificed hundreds of the monsters at his command. At the time, they were all normal monsters without wills, but he didn't seem to view his special servants any differently.

If Lily and the others were precious gems to me, then Kudou's servants were pebbles to him. He was content so long as he could throw them at his opponent and cause harm. There were pebbles for him to pick up everywhere. He didn't really have to go looking for them. In that respect, I pitied Kudou's servants. Having said that, I wasn't able to show those girls any sympathy given the current situation.

"And...?" I started with a light shake of my head. "What do you want in return?"

Even if they were pebbles to him, he had spent the time gathering them together. He had no reason to hand them over free of charge. It was perfectly obvious that he'd want some kind of compensation. If so...

"Hmm, let's see..." Kudou said, returning the mucky Caesar back up his sleeve. "Senpai, do you remember the proposal I gave last time?"

It was exactly what I thought it'd be. I'd seen this coming, but scowled nonetheless.

“So you’re saying I need to join forces with you to get your help?” I asked.

Kudou had made this proposal when we parted ways at Fort Tilia. I lived in harmony with my monsters, while Kudou subdued his. Although our stances were different...or perhaps because they were, our abilities perfectly complemented each other. One’s strengths covered for the other’s weaknesses. Together, maybe we could save this world from the rampant threat of the Woodlands, or destroy the world entirely. Of course Kudou would be fixated on me, given that.

In this case, his proposal wasn’t all that outrageous. He was offering to lend me his hand in return for mine—a truly fair exchange. I knew full well how powerful Kudou’s ability was. If I could borrow his strength, the probability of rescuing Lily would shoot up considerably.

However, joining hands with Kudou meant parting ways with humanity. I couldn’t possibly agree.

Before I could even answer him, Kudou spoke up, seeing through my thoughts. “Senpai, I don’t think this is all that bad a deal for you,” he said in a persuasive tone, remaining calm all the while. “It’s been about two months since you’ve been around human society here, right? You should’ve figured it out by now. Just who you should be joining forces with, I mean.”

I fell silent.

“Do you really plan to fight to the death over some monster?!”

Iino’s words echoed in my mind. From my perspective, they were cruel words. That wasn’t the true problem behind her statement, though. And Iino wasn’t the only one who thought that way.

Say you have two people. One gets captured and will die if left alone. However, if the other offers their life, the captive will be saved. Now say a friend of the captive learns of the situation. They won’t tell the other person to give up their life to save the captive. They simply can’t. No one would call the other person inhuman either, for not throwing away their own life.

However, say the person isn’t human. Then what? If offering the life of something inhuman—like a monster—would save the captive, wouldn’t the general consensus be different then? Now consider a world constantly threatened by monsters. Most would believe that the monster should be sacrificed.

In short, that was the situation I found myself in. The large majority of people would raise an eyebrow at someone willing to fight another person to the death for stealing their precious pet. One person’s treasure didn’t have the same value to everyone else. Living with monsters meant bearing the burden of such cognitive deviations and all the disadvantages that came with them.

“You dearly treasure your servants, so shouldn’t you be joining me?” Kudou asked.

There was a certain persuasiveness to his words, but he was wrong.

“What nonsense,” Gerbera answered immediately. Her words felt like salvation for my heart. “You walk down the path of bloody carnage. You will kill your enemies, your allies, and even yourself.” She paused, glaring into Kudou’s eyes. “Are you telling my lord to become like you? To treat us like disposable pawns?”

“I do think it would be much easier for him that way,” Kudou said. Gerbera’s interruption had been unexpected, but he immediately regained his footing. “As one of his servants, shouldn’t you sacrifice yourself for his happiness?”

“What a jest. Even if it’s easier that way, it isn’t the path to happiness,” Gerbera stated resolutely. “You’d do well not to make light of us. The man we fell for isn’t such a coward that he’d turn his back on happiness using a difficult situation as an excuse.”

“So you say, White Spider,” Anton said with a robot-like gaze as Gerbera raised her chin with pride. “Even you will find it too large a burden to fight a cheater with your body in that pitiful state. You’re all alone with a king who can do nothing. How will you save that slime?”

“Hmph. A pitiful state, you say? It may look that way to your rotten eyes,” Gerbera said, glancing down at her missing legs and scoffing, “but that’s a dangerous misunderstanding.”

As soon as she finished, a palpable torrent of bloodlust exploded from her slender body. Anton froze completely, as if Gerbera’s spider threads held her taut, unable to bear the pressure at all.

“I am strong as I am now,” Gerbera stated with a beautiful smile.

Even if she lost more of her greatest weapons—those vicious legs of hers—her condition was nowhere near pitiful.

“After all, I’ve just had my heart’s desire granted,” Gerbera continued. “I couldn’t possibly be in better shape. Allow me to tell you one more thing. I can draw out my strength precisely because my lord is with me. Do not run your mouth claiming he can do nothing as if you know anything. His value does not lie in such places.”

Anton couldn’t say a word.

“It seems you’re only skilled at spouting nonsense,” Gerbera added.

Anton’s mutated spawn Dora spoke in her mother’s stead. “Is the Great White Spider’s weapon not her talons, but her honeyed lips?”

Dora’s hands transformed into jet-black swords. She didn’t possess the abilities of a doppelganger, but instead, she could apparently manipulate her body to a certain extent.

Seeing Dora's fighting spirit, Gerbera let out a sigh of admiration. "You've been made quite well for a being born of some underling who can do naught but tremble before me."

"H-How dare you ridicule my mother!"

"I actually meant to praise you for turning out so well despite being treated like a failure. In our lord's world, they have a saying that a great person may be born of perfectly ordinary parents."

"You cur!"

Invisible sparks flew between them. Gerbera had become rather belligerent after Anton insulted me. At this rate, our conversation wouldn't get anywhere. In the end, it was up to the two masters to stop them.

"Stop that, Dora. Who told you it was okay to fight?"

"Gerbera, you too."

Gerbera turned back toward me and shrugged. In contrast, Dora fell to her knees, clutching her neck. Kudou had likely exercised his ability.

"Things have gotten rather out of hand, haven't they?" Kudou said, lowering his gaze to the kneeling Dora before facing me. "Let's start again."

"Fine," I replied with a nod. "Although, Gerbera already said pretty much everything I wanted to."

"So you mean..." Kudou murmured, his eyes widening ever so slightly.

"Yeah. I share her opinion," I declared.

There were parts of Gerbera's statement that overestimated me here and there, but what she said came explicitly from her trust in me. As such, I wanted to answer her trust as her master... No, not as her master, but as the man she offered her heart to.

"I already told you before, anyway. I'm no Demon King. I'm their master."

I couldn't walk the same path as Kudou. I was meant to take a different path. So long as I couldn't join hands with him, there was no way I could ever accept his offer. In a sense, this was the only way this could've turned out from the very beginning. The real problem started here with my refusal.

"If possible, I'd rather you let me pass peacefully," I said.

If I was to rescue Lily, I'd probably have to battle Takaya. It would be best if I didn't have to needlessly waste my energy here.

Fortunately, thanks to Gerbera, we had managed to sufficiently demonstrate our combat potential, regardless of her injuries. If it came to a fight, Kudou would absolutely suffer major casualties. What's more, there was nothing for him to gain, so there was no reason for him to quarrel with us. In terms of gains and losses, he had no choice

but to back down. All that was left was the matter of his personal feelings.

"I see. Okay, off you go then..." Kudou said. But then he added, "Did you really think I'd back down like that?"

Berta, who had remained quiet all this time, began growling. Anton's Juumonji-shaped spawn drew the sword at its waist. The dirty sludge Caesar oozed out from Kudou's sleeve. Dora staggered back to her feet and once more turned her arms into swords. Watching them posture themselves for battle, I let out a sigh.

"Is that so? How unfortunate," I said, readying my sword.

Asarina stretched out from my hand, baring her fangs. Gerbera cracked her knuckles and folded her legs, storing up strength to leap forth. I had wanted to avoid a battle, but now that it had come to this, there was no other way. I had to cut my way through.

I didn't need to annihilate my opponents, though. Rather, to avoid exhausting ourselves meaninglessly, Gerbera could scatter them and use that opening to force an escape. It would work. We could do it.

Not to mimic Gerbera, but I was in such great shape that my earlier exhausted state seemed like it had been a lie. I'd even go as far as saying I was in tip-top condition. I felt like all the mana circulating through my body was more invigorated than usual. Perhaps this was just a temporary sense of omnipotence from the exaltation of exchanging my feelings with Gerbera. Still, emotional matters were unexpectedly difficult to make light of.

Our morale was sky high. We would break through Kudou's servants and continue our pursuit of Lily. I stared down the obstacles standing before me...when I suddenly saw Kudou's expression.

I was astonished. Kudou was looking at me with a faint smile and slightly knit brows. It was a little different from his usual smile, though. Not quite sadness. Not quite pity. Not quite envy. It was a complex expression made up of all three. I didn't know what had caused him to make such a face. When I blinked, his usual smile was plastered back onto his face.

"Heh. Heh heh. Please don't misunderstand me."

Kudou's smile didn't betray his inner thoughts. He held both his hands in front of his chest before stretching out a palm toward me.

"This doesn't mean I'll fight you or anything, Senpai."

"What...?"

Kudou turned away from me as I stood there in bewilderment, then addressed his own servants.

"All of you, stop this. He's not an enemy."

"My king, what are you saying?"

Berta remained poised to lunge at me at any moment, turning only one of her heads to Kudou in confusion. His other servants were

just as perplexed. So was I.

“What’s the meaning of this?” I asked.

“It’s not all that complicated,” Kudou said with an indifferent shrug. “I just mean that I never said anything about withdrawing my offer just because you won’t join forces with me.”

I was completely flabbergasted.

“It’s unfortunate you won’t become my ally, but I don’t really mind. Just as I said before, I’ll lend you all of the troops I have present here.”

This was very much unexpected. Even Gerbera looked somewhat taken aback. I couldn’t grasp Kudou’s intentions at all. My confusion probably showed quite plainly on my face.

“There’s no need to be suspicious of me,” Kudou said with a chuckle. “There’s no caveat.”

“So you’re saying you’ll help me without expecting anything in return?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Frankly, no.”

“Ha ha. Well, I suppose you see me as an enemy. It’s only natural you’d be suspicious.” Even when I clearly told him that I distrusted him, Kudou didn’t really seem to mind. “However, I don’t see you as my enemy.”

“What are you getting at...?”

“I’d hate for you to die over something so trivial,” Kudou elaborated, his grin widening. “I believe I mentioned this before. The only one I want to join forces with is the one who, in the same place, at the same time, in the same circumstances, awoke to the same power as me. Just you.”

There was a hint of zeal in his voice. It revealed a lunatic-like fixation on an inverted sense of values. Or maybe it was the very last remnant of humanity within him, coming in the form of empathy.

“You are wonderful,” Kudou continued passionately. “This is no exaggeration. You cannot die here. That’s why I still want to help you.”

“My Lord...?” Gerbera muttered. “Is this fellow perchance a good person?”

“You’re being naive,” I told her.

Not that it was strange she’d interpret it this way. Kudou just favored me *too* much. He wasn’t a good person by any metric, but his intent to help me seemed genuine.

Thinking back on it, he had done the same thing when he revealed his identity at Fort Tilia. He had offered me information I knew nothing about, asking if I would join forces with him. When I turned him down, he hadn’t attacked me in a frenzy, instead just

backing down and leaving quietly.

Kudou's attitude was both rational and sincere. There was nothing hidden behind it. It was impossible for him to be plotting something wicked. He didn't have the ability to judge right from wrong, good from evil, and profit from loss. His sympathy for the one and only person who was the same as him simply turned into a fathomless fixation.

He was seriously trying to help, and when it came to saving Lily, the more forces we had on our side, the better. I exchanged looks with Gerbera, then we nodded to each other before turning back to Kudou.

"Fine. I'll accept your help."



At the time, I couldn't deny that I felt a hint of hope within me. Kudou had been in the same place as me, at the same time, in the same environment, and had awakened to the same power. I could've easily turned out the same as him. He was empathetic toward me, and that went both ways. Somewhere deep in my heart, I didn't want to fight him.

However, our lives were at odds. At this rate, we would one day have to come to blows. It was a premonition. When that time came, it would be a desperate struggle for survival. I would have to lead my servants to kill Kudou. To avoid that, one of us had to change our ways. In other words, I would have to fall down to where Kudou was in life, or he would have to return to where I was.

If there was one person who could drag him back up here, then it was me. Kudou was so fixated on me that this unexpected encounter had given me the finest thread to connect to that future. That was what I believed.

Naturally, I already knew this was but the faintest of hopes. The possibility existed, but there was no way such a future would come to be. The fact that I knew this but still dwelled on these thoughts proved my weakness. However, I believed this was exactly what differentiated me from the one who had chosen the life of a Demon King.



"My Lord," Gerbera said, still quite wary of Kudou's group but no longer postured for battle. "If we're done talking, then we should get going immediately."

"Yeah..."

Quite some time had passed. It was good that Kudou was cooperating with us instead of fighting, but that didn't mean anything if we didn't catch up to Takaya.

“Oh, about that. It should be fine,” Kudou said, ignoring our fears. He was hard to read, but right now he was clearly in a great mood. “I’ve already made arrangements on my end.”

I cocked my head as Kudou raised a finger.

“What do you mean? Explain.”

“Of course. Actually, I already sent some of the other troops over to where Takaya is.”

“Oh, I see. That’s why you don’t have many monsters with you now.”

Kudou nodded. “I haven’t finished replenishing my forces either. It’s not like I brought all of my pawns, but I do have thirty or so monsters out there chasing him. If their attack goes well, you might not even have to catch up to him.”

“Attack? Hey, Lily is fine, right?”

“There’s nothing to fear. At worst, they should still be stalling him.”

Thirty normal monsters. Even against a warrior armed with a magic weapon, they were enough of a threat to escalate the fight into a major battle depending on their approach. If they devoted themselves to stalling, they could buy a significant amount of time and exhaust him considerably.

“The fastest way to catch up to him is to ride Berta.”

“Oh?”

I looked over to the two-headed wolf. Unlike the small Ayame, her body was very large. It was entirely possible to ride her.

“Is that fine with you?” I asked Berta.

“Such is my king’s command. I don’t mind.”

Berta’s tentacles and tail waved about. She looked rather imposing, but when she acted like this, she looked kind of cute, much like a dog.

“Oh. But in that case, you’ll have to ride tandem with me,” Kudou added.

“Ugh,” Gerbera groaned, frowning for some reason.

I didn’t know whether she disliked the idea of me riding Berta or the idea of me riding with Kudou. Perhaps it was both. I felt sorry for her, but it was better I use everything at my disposal as much as possible to increase the chances of saving Lily.

“Use everything I can, huh?” I murmured to myself.

“What’s up, Senpai?”

“It’s nothing. Just talking to myself.”

After that, we had a short strategy meeting. Kudou looked dissatisfied with my proposed plan. Gerbera looked displeased as well. But after I convinced them, they both gave their consent.

Once we finished preparing, we began chasing Takaya.

Now then, let's go get Lily back.

Chapter 8: A Strange Dream ~Lily's POV~

“Haah...”

My sigh dissolved into the refreshing mountain air. I was all alone now. I had fallen in the landslide Gerbera caused, separating me from all the others. I was currently on my way toward my master. In contrast to the invigorating air, my footsteps were heavy. My heart felt even heavier.

Once again, I failed to properly protect my master, I thought to myself, another sigh escaping my lips. He was still safe, of course, despite my failure. I could tell he was through our mental path. Still, that was just hindsight. It didn't change the fact that I had failed to protect him.

When Iino attacked us, I had been the closest to him. Yet she had gotten past me so easily, striking him in the face. She'd had no intention of really hurting him, so things turned out okay, but if not for that, he would be dead already.

Even after that, I'd been altogether pathetic. No matter what I did, none of my attacks had affected Iino. She'd toyed with me completely. I'd felt down after finding out she'd been holding back the whole time so that I wouldn't die.

“I thought I'd gotten stronger, though...” I mumbled to myself.

It was true, in a sense. After Juumonji had handily defeated me at Fort Tilia, I was keenly aware of my lack of strength. I'd put in the effort to somehow resolve that. As a result, I'd definitely gotten stronger. I had more combat experience, and my powers as a monster were greater. The way I'd been when I first met my master couldn't compare to how I was now.

I'd even eaten many monsters at Fort Tilia. Hundreds of them were buried in my body now. Though I couldn't manifest all of their powers together at once, the monsters of the Fringes couldn't pose a threat to me anymore.

And still, I hadn't come anywhere close to matching Iino Yuna's strength. She was certainly a bad match for us. The Skanda was famous in the Colony. She was one of the few cheaters among the exploration team who'd earned a nickname. One could say she was the strongest fighter in this entire world.

Iino had even handled Gerbera, who'd managed to hang in there

against Juumonji, with ease. If Gerbera couldn't beat her, then I surely couldn't accomplish anything. However, since we had come to blows with both Juumonji and Iino within two short months, I couldn't just sit here making excuses.

What should I do...? I wondered. It wasn't like I'd been fooling around. For example, I'd continued to attempt partial mimicry so that I could maintain my body as a girl while bringing out other monsters' features that could give me major power-ups. It wasn't going well, though. There were no signs that it was working. The limit of my species was blocking me from advancing like an enormous wall.

My other plan, to mimic Mizushima Miho's ability as a cheater, also remained out of reach. My mimicry didn't exactly replicate the powers of those I mimicked. The result was inevitably degraded, so I couldn't reproduce abnormal powers like cheats. Or perhaps there was nothing to mimic, seeing that Mizushima Miho had never awakened to a cheat.

In either case, the outcome was the same. In the end, a fake like me could only get so far, no matter how much I struggled. That obvious truth pained my heart, and that pain awoke useless thoughts within me like a wave breaking on the shore.

If it weren't me by his side, but the real Mizushima Miho... The real thing could surely do things a fake couldn't.. I knew this was a meaningless hypothesis. I was also fully aware that letting my mind go down this hole was a terrible idea. Regardless, I found myself caught on these thoughts rather frequently, especially in the last few weeks. If only I were the real thing. I kept telling myself that over and over.

Katou had had another perspective on this, however. According to her, the degraded result of my mimicry didn't mean I *couldn't* do something; it meant I could, but in an incomplete form. If so, I should've been able to mimic Mizushima Miho's nature as a visitor, even if it was incomplete, allowing me to awaken to a cheat. Being fake had nothing to do with it. There was some other reason preventing me from doing it. So she claimed, at least. Now that I thought about it, she did have a point... In any case, it didn't change the fact that I couldn't do it.

"Haah..."

I sighed again without realizing it and shook my head. There was no point lingering over these thoughts. I couldn't remain on my own out here. I had to calm down. I had to reunite with the others as quickly as possible. I picked up my pace and hurried forth.

"Master..."

The restlessness in my heart grew stronger. I had to confirm his safety with my own eyes. I was getting impatient at the distance to my destination. I'd already been walking for such a long time...

“Huh?”

How long had I been walking, actually? I had no answer, and my feet came to a stop. How strange. Why couldn't I figure out something so simple?

“It's obvious why you can't,” a voice said. Before I knew it, there was a girl before me. “I mean, this is a dream.”

In the next instant, the world crumbled. The mountain scenery shattered like glass, casting the shards into darkness. I couldn't react at all. The girl who'd spoken to me floated up in front of my eyes. She was the only thing I could see in this pitch-black world.

Her hands were clasped behind her back, and she leaned forward. Her flaxen hair swayed in the air as if she were underwater. This girl, peering up at me from right below my face—was me.

I get it now. The abruptness. The absurdity. This is definitely a dream. I was having a so-called lucid dream. But where was I dreaming? I had gotten caught in a landslide and separated from my master. I had definitely walked through the mountain to reunite with him.

And then... And then...what? I couldn't remember. I pinched my brow as the “me” in front of my eyes questioned me.

“Isn't there something weird about this?”

Something else? Oh, right. I'm a mimic slime. I don't even need a wink of sleep. So why am I dreaming? Obviously, I had to be unconscious to see a dream, meaning I had lost consciousness in reality. Something had happened. Something had caused me to pass out.

“Wake up already.”

Right, I have to wake up.

“If you don't hurry, Majima will die.”

Chapter 9: A Single Answer Guided by Madness ~Lily's POV~

And so, I woke up.

“Ugh... Gah...”

I groaned. My consciousness was hazy. I felt sick. I remembered this sensation. Yes...this was what it felt like for something to destroy my mimicked brain and knock me out.

“Oh, you’re awake, Miho.”

I jolted up to my feet at the sudden voice—well, I tried to, at least, but I lost my balance.

“Wha—?!”

Hard metal clanked together. I couldn’t move my arms for some reason. My movements were restricted in a way I had never imagined possible, causing me to tumble over.



“Whoa there.”

The moment before I fell, someone caught me in their arms.

“Hey now, be careful. I do mean to protect you, Miho, but the worst can still happen.”

The voice came from a boy. His tone was filled with consideration. He sat me down on the ground, still holding me in his arms.

“Ummm...” I was confused by the sudden turn of events. The first thing that came to mind was to thank him for catching me, a perfectly commonplace reaction. “Th-Tha...” However, the words wouldn’t come out. “What...the...?”

I realized a chain encircled my whole body. I reflexively strengthened and strained my arms. The chain links ground with a shriek, scraping against each other, but they didn’t break. They didn’t bend. They didn’t even slacken.

“Th-Then how about this!”

I decided to undo my mimicry and return to the form of a slime to escape this irritating bondage. But I couldn’t.

“Wh-Why?”

For some reason, I couldn’t do something that was as natural as breathing to me. That was when I finally realized.

“Are these chains...magic?”

They were likely used to restrain and weaken their target. Thinking back on it, I’d felt strangely lethargic when I tried to break the chains. I turned pale. I realized I was nothing more than a little girl now. I hesitantly directed my gaze to the person behind all this.

“You’re...” I started.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Miho?”

A boy wearing a tattered school uniform looked down at me. At a glance, he looked like a delinquent, but he wasn’t really dirty or anything. His uniform was clean despite its shabby state, and the sword hanging from his waist was clearly valuable. His outfit was just mismatched. Judging by the mantle currently spread out beneath me, he normally wore one over his ragged clothes.

“What’s with the weird face? Don’t tell me you forgot about me,” the boy said playfully.

I did recognize him. To be precise, I knew this boy through Mizushima Miho’s memories.

“Takaya...Jun...”

He was Mizushima Miho’s childhood friend, a warrior among the cheaters. The boy who’d traveled through the forest all on his own, reaching Fort Ebenus just so that he could seek help from the first expeditionary force, was for some reason right in front of me.

“Takaya, why...are you...?”

“Come on, Miho. No need to treat me like a stranger,” he said, scratching his cheek. “Just call me Jun, like you always did.”

There was no way I would. I honestly couldn’t understand the situation. The haziness clouding my thoughts was gone now, but all I could remember was walking through the mountains and reuniting with my master. I couldn’t recall anything after that. When I woke up, I’d found myself restrained here. What had happened? More importantly, was my master still safe?

“Oh! Are you maybe angry that I left you all alone in that hut?” Takaya said, showing no signs of noticing my confusion. “I’m sorry for making you feel so uneasy. I did try my best, just so you know.”

It sounded like he found this conversation enjoyable. There was a slight pout behind his affectionate tone. It was like he couldn’t even see me bound in chains right in front of him.

I had no idea what was going on. Judging from his reactions, his statements, and his attitude, maybe he had no idea I wasn’t Mizushima Miho? If so...maybe I had a chance. I gulped. If I handled this well, I could gather information on what had happened since I passed out. I suppressed my unease and opened my dry lips.

“Can I ask you something?” I said.

“Sure. What?”

Takaya cocked his head and smiled. He looked happy just to hear me speak to him. In that instant, I lost the words I was trying to say.

“Ask me anything you want, Miho,” he said warmly.

None of this warmth was directed at me. It was directed at a girl who didn’t exist anymore. The happier he was, the more fun he was having, the emptier his emotions felt to me, knowing that the one they were meant for was gone. It prevented me from speaking.

“Miho?”

His curious voice brought me back to my senses. This wasn’t the time to be thinking of unnecessary things. There was much I had to verify right now. I had to focus on what was in front of me. Thus, I shook off such idle thoughts and took action.

“Why am I here?” I asked.

“Oh. That? Well, I guess you’d wonder about that, huh?” Takaya Jun replied, his smile ever unchanging. “I did stab you right in the head and all.”

“Wha—?!”

His nonchalant criminal confession had me at a complete loss.

“Did it hurt? Sorry. It didn’t seem like you’d pass out as you are now unless I went that far.”

The first thing that had come into sight when I woke up was Takaya Jun. Just by that fact, he was definitely the culprit who’d put

me in these restraints, or he was working with the one who'd done it. Also, the fact that a mimic slime like me had been knocked out meant that I'd probably suffered enough damage that maintaining my consciousness was no longer possible.

Frankly speaking, it would mean that Takaya Jun had attacked me. However, I suspected he'd used some sort of magic tool or something instead. The deep affection in his voice convinced me of that for a moment.

"You know?" I asked, still totally confused.

"Of course I do," he answered casually. "Miho, you were eaten by a slime. Meaning your body right now is that slime itself."

I continued staring at the boy before me, unable to utter a single word. He knew that Mizushima Miho had died, that I'd taken her corpse within me, and that I was a monster borrowing her form. He knew everything, yet he still treated me like Mizushima Miho. Something was clearly wrong with him. He was broken. How did he end up like this?

There wasn't much need to ask that question. I could understand it better than anyone else in the world, after all. I had the deceased Mizushima Miho's memories within me. Her time spent with her childhood friend Takaya Jun was naturally among them.

The album of her memories had deteriorated greatly because of the limits of my mimicry. The borders between colors were blurred, and several pages had been torn out. Regardless, I knew Mizushima Miho liked her childhood friend Takaya Jun. Her sweet feelings were different from wanting to embrace him after he grew up into a fine man. However, there was a special affection in there toward someone she had known ever since she was a child.

In my opinion, Mizushima Miho was a clever girl. She'd perceived Takaya Jun's faint feelings as a mix of his affection toward a childhood friend and his adoration of an older woman. That he'd never confessed was proof, in a sense, that she was correct. His first love wasn't strong enough to risk his relationship with her as his childhood friend. If the two of them had been able to continue their lives like that, perhaps it would've turned into a bittersweet first love one day.

But that never came to be. Their futures had been twisted by being teleported to this world, along with many others. They could never return home. They could never see their families again. That was to say nothing of how they didn't even know whether they would be able to see the next sunrise, what with the constant threat of monsters.

Everything was so extreme that anyone and everyone had been driven into a corner. This also applied to Takaya Jun. The boy in

Mizushima Miho's memories was childish and mischievous; he had a young and tender heart. In the end, he yearned for his fleeting first love as a way of supporting his mind. Mizushima Miho had never said a thing, even though she'd noticed this change in him. The clever girl understood that she needed to keep quiet for his sake.

He could keep trying his best so long as it was for her sake. That was the only way he could maintain his sanity. It was precisely because of this drive to do something for a loved one that Takaya Jun had managed to endure the loneliness and pain of crossing the Woodlands alone. That was also why, when faced with the tragic death of Mizushima Miho, his mind had quickly lost everything that had been supporting it. His eyes could only see what he wanted them to see now.

"I won't hand you over to anyone. Never again," Takaya muttered as if speaking to himself. There was a dark passion to his voice. "Be happy, Miho. I now possess the power to make that so."

The sword at Takaya's waist clinked. That was when I first sensed the faint smell of iron. Normally, I would've noticed this right away with my mimicked firefang's sense of smell. This was the stench of bloodstains and innards. I turned around and gasped.

"What...? No way...?"

A small distance away, I saw what could only be described as a field of bodies and blood. Monster corpses lay scattered across the ground. There were dozens of them. There were monsters in the Kitrus Mountains, seeing how far it was from any human settlements, but this many in one place seemed abnormal. As far as I could tell, Takaya Jun didn't have any noticeable injuries. This was strange, even for a warrior like him. *Maybe it's that sword... If it's some kind of special magic weapon, it might be possible...*

"I got stronger," Takaya Jun said as I turned back toward him. His smile contained both warmth for a single person and inhuman coldness for everything else. "So you can relax now, Miho. No matter who comes, I won't hand you over." There was a bloodlust in his voice that sent chills down my spine.

My master is in danger! That was the first thought that came to mind. The recent battle with the Skanda had hampered much of my master's combat potential. Nevertheless, he was sure to chase after me, grasping at whatever prospect of victory he could find.

However, if he couldn't properly estimate Takaya Jun's strength, victory would be wholly overturned. For example, if my master didn't know about that sword, it was highly likely Takaya Jun would strike him down. I couldn't possibly allow that to happen.

"Wait a moment, Takaya Jun," I said, glaring at the smiling boy. "I'm not Mizushima Miho. I'm Majima Takahiro's first servant, the

mimic slime Lily. Your childhood friend is already dead.”

I was well aware of how dangerous this statement was. I didn’t know if I could get Takaya to admit that Mizushima Miho was dead. Even if I could, he would realize that I was the monster who’d stolen his precious Miho’s form. Nothing he did to me as a result would be unexpected.

Even disregarding that, with Takaya’s current emotional state, there was no telling what would set off his fuse and cause him to explode. If I were only thinking about my own safety, this would be a careless statement to make. However, this was far, far better than exposing my master to danger.

“Dead? Miho?”

Takaya’s smile vanished. He stared at me fixedly. His emotionless stare sent goose bumps down my skin, but I didn’t care.

“Yes,” I answered. “Mizushima Miho is no longer here. No matter how much you hope to protect her, you can’t.”

Never again. Not for all eternity. Takaya Jun was never to be rewarded. What did he feel thanks to this cruel reality? Or what did he not feel? This moment of silence felt terribly long, but in truth, it had only lasted ten seconds at most.

“You’re right... Miho is already dead,” Takaya uttered. “You’re a monster who ate her corpse.”

His voice was hollow, and it made my blood run cold. The moment Mizushima Miho vanished from his mind, he would sever my head. I was sure of it.

“So what?” he said.

This was not the proclamation of death I’d resolved myself for. Having said that, it wasn’t like I hadn’t gotten through to him at all.

“You’re Miho, remember?”

“What...?”

I looked up at Takaya, baffled by his words. He was smiling again. There was unconditional affection in his gaze. His conviction was so pure that I could easily see it.

“Aah...”

I let out my breath, almost as if I were screaming, yet with no voice. In that instant, for the very first time, I didn’t regard this boy’s madness with sadness or pity. All I could feel was fear.

“No matter what form you take, I can tell.”

Though my figure was reflected in his eyes, he wasn’t focused on my existence. This didn’t mean he was blind to the truth, though. Because he had the eyes of a madman, only seeing what he wanted to see, he could perceive things that weren’t normally visible. Takaya Jun definitely saw my true nature, deep within my being.

“Dead? Eaten? So what? Miho is right here. I know that.”

“Y-You’re wrong. I’m...”

“You deny it? Then try answering me. If Miho isn’t here, then what is?”

Takaya Jun’s question was simple. However, after I heard it, my lips unexpectedly froze. What was I, exactly? That question stabbed at the true nature of my being far more than I’d expected it to.



My ability as a mimic slime allowed me to reproduce everything about my target. Regardless of the degradation that came with it, this was akin to pillaging my target’s very existence. My master had placed a restriction on me eating beings with wills. That was because it also encroached on my own being.

However, a certain doubt came to mind. What exactly was I, and what were these other personalities encroaching on in this process? I’d already eaten someone with a will—Mizushima Miho. Her influence over me could be seen everywhere.

For example, I’d always prepared my master’s meals. Rose always had a mountain of other things to make, and back when we didn’t trust Katou, we couldn’t possibly have left the cooking to her. However, even after we left the Woodlands and entered the human world, I still continued to cook during our journey. That was because I wanted to feed my master delicious food. It was also because I found cooking fun. So where exactly did this feminine sensibility come from?

There were other examples too, like that conversation we had immediately before Iino Yuna’s attack. My master had been worried about me because Gerbera was showing him affection. He didn’t need to be. I’d told him we servants didn’t understand such things. To us, our master was everyone’s master. I could understand what had him worried, but still, I didn’t think he should pick a single partner.

However, this also meant that while I understood this as a servant, I was the only one who also understood our master’s philosophy on love. This definitely came from the portion of Mizushima Miho in me. If so, where was I in there? What was I to begin with?

I don’t get it. I don’t understand what I am at all...



“Looks like break time is over...” Takaya Jun groaned.

Just as I realized he had been speaking, he hefted me up under his arm.

“Hyah!”

“I thought you’d chase us. I’m not handing Miho over.”

I reflexively closed my eyes and heard Takaya Jun’s voice filled with naked hostility. When I opened them once more, my sight fell over a scene playing out across the field of monster corpses.

“Ah...”

There was a two-headed wolf, and riding atop it was a boy covered in dirt and blood.

“I’m going to take Lily back,” the boy declared with a sharp glare. For just one instant, his eyes softened as they caught my figure.

“Master...”

My trembling lips and heart called out to the boy I loved.

Chapter 10: The Battle to Conquer Takaya Jun ~Lily's POV~

“Master...”

My master appeared before me. He was covered in dirt, and there were many small cuts all over his body. Having said that, thinking of how he'd already encountered Takaya Jun once before this, seeing him safe and sound was a turn of good fortune.

Normally, I was supposed to be protecting him, so him coming to save me seemed like some kind of bad joke...but I'd still expected him to come.

The moment I saw him, unmistakable joy welled up within me, as well as regret and fear for dragging him into this dangerous place. Also, I was unexpectedly bewildered. But that only made sense. For some reason, my master hadn't brought along any of his servants aside from Asarina, who couldn't be physically separated from him in the first place.

Right before I'd lost consciousness, I'd seen Rose with him... Where was she now? The only possibility that came to mind was that something had happened when they encountered Takaya Jun. She was my precious little sister. I was worried. The chains binding my body were blocking my senses through the mental path, so I couldn't confirm how any of my sisters were doing except for Asarina, whom I could see with my own eyes.

What had me even more confused was that instead of my sisters, my master was straddling an enormous wolf. She had two ferocious heads, as well as multiple tentacles coming from her lower back. She looked majestic. She'd changed since last I saw her, but I knew right away that this was the monster named Berta.

But Berta wasn't my master's servant. She served the other monster tamer, Kudou Riku. What had brought Berta and my master together? The answer to that question lay within the person sitting in front of him.

“A two-headed wolf... What's it called again? Hmmm. I don't really remember,” Takaya said. Apparently, he harbored the same doubts as me as he looked at the hooded figure sitting in front of my master. “Whatever. That thing being here means you're the other monster tamer. Kudou Riku, right?”

The hooded figure didn't answer—or possibly couldn't answer—

meaning it really was Kudou. I didn't know why he was here, but apparently my master had worked something out with him to save me.

Takaya Jun looked at the silent Kudou and shrugged. "I never thought you'd show yourself like this. Long time no see, Kudou. Not that we've actually talked up until now."

Takaya Jun and Kudou Riku had been in the same grade. Judging by what Takaya said, the two of them hadn't really seen each other much in school, but they at least knew each other's faces. Not that it made any difference, from the looks of it.

"Did you think I wouldn't know who you were if you hid your face and kept silent? Did you think you could take me by surprise like that? Too bad. I know all about you. I probably know way more than Majima over there."

"What do you mean?" my master asked. "You learned of Kudou because news reached Fort Ebenus about the attack on Fort Tilia, right? You can't possibly know more than that."

"True, Iino did deliver news to Ebenus. And I heard the same thing when I met up with her in Serrata, but I knew about Kudou before that."

"That—"

"Can't be? Of course it can," Takaya declared with an aggressive smile. "Heaven's Voice told me so."

"Heaven's Voice? What's that?"

"Maybe it'll be easier for you to understand if I said they were the one who helped organize the attack on Fort Tilia."

"No way..." I muttered, my eyes shooting open as I listened to their conversation.

There had been hints that someone had connected Juumonji Tatsuya, who'd gone to Fort Ebenus with the expeditionary force, with Sakagami Gouta and Kudou Riku, who'd been left behind in the Depths. In the end, we never figured out who that was, but we did know it was a cheater in the first expeditionary force who could communicate with people over long distances. And once again, they were pulling the strings here.

I was shocked by this, but my master reacted somewhat differently. He clicked his tongue bitterly as if he'd been expecting this.

"No wonder..." my master said. "That's how you knew how to knock Lily out. I thought it was weird. That would've been impossible unless you knew the details of a mimic slime's biology."

For a moment, I was confused by what my master said, but then I suddenly realized. I didn't remember the moment I'd lost consciousness myself, but Takaya Jun had told me that he'd stabbed

me in the head.

It was the quickest and most efficient method to knock me out. Accurate knowledge was necessary to accomplish that. How would Takaya Jun know this, though? Information on us wasn't circulated much outside our circle. We were a group of monsters, hiding our identities whenever possible.

That was to say nothing of the conditions needed to overpower us. That being the case, it meant someone had to have actually seen it to pass on the information. There hadn't been many occasions to witness this. One such occasion happened in the battle against Juumonji at Fort Tilia.

Back then, after Juumonji had cut me down, he struck me with his fist, pulverizing my head and knocking me out. Someone there must have passed this information to this "Heaven's Voice," who then told Takaya.

"Sakagami Gouta..." I muttered.

"Oh, you noticed too, Miho?" Takaya said, grinning.

I remembered now. The boy Kudou Riku had used as a decoy had been present at the time. After that, he'd fainted from his wounds, and the Alliance Knights had taken him away. Then Berta recovered him and ultimately ate him at Kudou's command.

During that time, Sakagami Gouta had plenty of opportunities to relay the information to his helper, this Heaven's Voice. Perhaps I was overthinking things, but maybe Sakagami had chosen not to run away at the time because he'd been communicating with this voice and the voice had been instigating him.

In a sense, this supposed Heaven's Voice was more like the devil's whispers. Considering their methods during the attack on Fort Tilia and this incident here, it was enough malice to send a shiver down one's spine. Who exactly could it be? My master seemed to be wondering the same thing.

"Takaya. Do you know the identity of this Heaven's Voice?" he asked, his expression grim.

"Who knows? When I asked for a name, they merely told me 'Heaven's Voice.' I could tell right away that they had no intention of answering me from the get-go. As long as I could get information on Miho, nothing else interested me. So I didn't really care, to be honest. That's why I don't know their name, or whether they're a boy or girl."

"Even though you spoke with them?"

"They're simply calling themselves 'Heaven's Voice,' but there's no voice to hear. It's not like speaking on the phone. It's more like words being directly inserted into your head... Something like telepathy, I guess? They didn't say anything else about themselves either. Well, they sure did jabber on about other people, though. For example..."

Takaya paused and turned his gaze to Kudou. “Kudou, about you and Todoroki Miya.”

Todoroki Miya? I was bewildered by the sudden mention of that name. I felt like I’d heard it somewhere before, but I couldn’t remember who she was exactly. My master also looked puzzled. However, Kudou’s reaction was entirely different. His face was hidden by his hood, but his shoulders jolted. Berta’s reaction was even more straightforward.

“You scoundrel... You dare mock our king?”

Berta’s growl was full of hostility and wrath. She was seething to the point where she was liable to attack at any moment. Our masters were different, but there were things we had in common as servants. This here was a display of her unbearable fury at someone trampling on the sacred soil that was her master.

I found her reaction a little unexpected. Kudou Riku’s ability allowed him to force servants under his rule. They were all tools to him. This was no different for the monsters in his service who possessed wills. However, Berta was angry for her master’s sake. In other words, their relationship was more than forced obedience. In this instance, though, it backfired.

“Calm down, Berta,” my master said. He was the only one of the three who maintained his composure. “You too,” he added, slapping Kudou’s shoulder. “He’s just trying to shake you up. You’re letting him get to you.”

“I know...” Kudou answered. His voice sounded dry, and it was difficult to hear him.

Kudou gave my master a nod, though it was hard to tell because of his hood. Watching this exchange, Takaya let out a dissatisfied snort. Much like how my master was trying to extract as much information as he could from this conversation, Takaya was trying to use this opportunity to agitate Kudou.

Currently, my master didn’t have his servants by his side. None of the monsters who were connected to each other by their hearts were here. Instead, he had a hastily built team. He couldn’t afford for things to fall apart here. In that respect, Takaya’s judgment that Kudou would react was sound, regardless of his insanity. It was extremely troublesome.

The fact that Takaya could make such a calm decision meant it would be difficult for my master to prod for openings in his mind. Even though Takaya was burdened by my bound body under his arm, it was questionable whether my master could make up for the difference. I’d hoped that we could find another path to victory...but now that Takaya’s plot to agitate Kudou had failed, he had no more reason to continue this conversation.

“It would’ve been easier if you’d lost it and attacked me. Oh well,” Takaya grumbled, then his expression changed completely. “So... You said something earlier. What was it again?” he said to my master. His voice sounded bloodthirsty. “Oh yeah. You said something about taking back Miho... Right, Majimaaaa?!”

Hatred seeped from his body as if someone had laid their hands on the most precious thing in the world to him. He was like a boiling witch’s cauldron. Every negative emotion muddled together inside him, seething in a violent rage that corrupted his surroundings. My master didn’t falter at this, though.

“Yeah, that’s right. You’ll give her back to me,” he replied calmly, as if he had long made his resolve. “That’s why I came here.”

“You son of a...” Takaya’s expression twisted. I could hear him grinding his teeth. “Don’t misunderstand. Miho doesn’t belong to you.”

“No,” my master said with a light shake of the head. “Lily is mine.”

“—!”

I was unexpectedly shocked by his statement.

“Lily is my servant. I’m her master. Nobody has the right to say anything about that.”

An overbearing declaration like this didn’t suit my master. It showed just how strong his determination was in coming here. It made me happy. I really was happy...but his opponent was a warrior, a cheater.

By nature, the monsters Kudou could force into his service had a limit to their individual strength. From what I could tell, Berta was stronger than before, but she was still weaker than me. It would be hard for her to take on a warrior just by combining forces with my master and Asarina. If Gerbera were here, and in perfect condition, maybe they could fight on equal ground... No, that was still far too reckless.

I bit my lip, coming to a conclusion I’d already been aware of. Was there any way of overcoming this situation? My thoughts ran wild as I remained bound in Takaya’s arm. There had to be a way to protect my master. There had to be something I could do. I didn’t care what happened to me. If I couldn’t find a way, my master would... If so, my measly life didn’t—

“Lily.”

I suddenly heard my name. I raised my head and met my master’s eyes. I was sure my expression was stiff. Having interpreted this as a show of anxiety, my master smiled at me.

“It’s okay. Just wait a little longer.”

“Ah...”

I tried to say something back, but before I could, Takaya Jun's anger and insanity exploded.

"Don't...fuck with...me... Don't fuck with me, goddammit!"

His face was horribly contorted now. It was like he'd suffered unbearable agony just from us exchanging a few words. That only stood to reason. He only saw what he wanted to. He didn't recognize reality. From his perspective, every word we spoke to each other created cracks in his delusional world.

"I won't hand Miho over to anyone ever again! Not anyone! Never again!"

Takaya Jun roared and denied the reality before him. His bejeweled sword shone with a dazzling light, calling forth death.

"Dodge it!" my master yelled.

A pillar of earth burst forth from beneath Berta's feet. The wolf twisted her body and dodged the earthen thrust. However, Takaya was nowhere close to done.

"More's coming, Berta!"

"I know. Grab on tight."

Berta dashed at my master's command. In an instant, her figure became ashen wind. A normal person wouldn't have been able to keep up with her speed. Despite having a much larger physique than the common firefang, this grotesque beast ran through the forest several times faster than one. However, that wasn't enough to surpass the kinetic vision of a warrior.

"Get the hell outta my sight! Majimaaa!"

Takaya poured his tremendous mana as a cheater into the bejeweled sword. Pillars of earth sprouted from the ground in Berta's wake. They looked like a manifestation of the fiendish fury and madness rampaging within Takaya Jun.

"Grrr..."

Berta's enormous body soared about as she dodged the pillars. My master was seated behind Kudou, and he was desperately clinging to his back. Berta had wrapped her tentacles around their waists to help stabilize them on her back. Asarina was also entwined around them to help. If not for all that, they would have been shaken off.

Countless pillars erupted from Berta's shadow. The mundane scenery of the mountain transformed into an otherworldly sight. Berta was trying to somehow get closer to us, but Takaya's attacks didn't permit her to. By channeling his overflowing mana into the blade, he maintained a one-sided offensive through long-range magic. Berta was sure to slip up over time. The situation was getting worse and worse.

"Graaawr!"

Berta had also judged that she was getting nowhere. One of her heads turned our way and opened its jaws. Flames came pouring out,

closing in on us in a straight line. At this rate, I would also get caught in the raging fire, but there was plenty of distance between us, so Takaya wasn't going to let such a measly attack through.

"Hah! Pathetic!"

A pillar shot up in front of us, easily obstructing the blaze. This was the difference between a cheater and a monster. That was the harsh reality. In fact, Takaya Jun laughed as if this attack had given him a splendid opportunity.

"Eat this!"

A slanted pillar burst from the ground, rushing toward Berta's blind spot. Having just unleashed her flames, her reaction was just a moment too late. The pillar slammed right into the enormous wolf's abdomen.

"What?!"

Suddenly, a green membrane stopped the blow. It collided with the pillar, the two forces throwing each other off, scattering green sludge into the air.

"Well done, Caesar!"

This had only bought a split second of time, but that was enough for Berta to slip past the pillar. Takaya froze up. He'd been sure his attack would strike home. Using that chance, Berta quickly closed the distance. By the time he came back to his senses, it was already too late. At least, it would've been for a normal person.

"Fuck!"

Takaya Jun had the physical abilities of a warrior, so it wasn't so simple to get close to him. Berta swooped down on his flank, but Takaya leaped back, opening the gap once more. With that momentum, the battle turned into a hectic melee moving through the mountains.

"Graaawr!"

One of Berta's heads spat incandescent fire, while the other shot intensely cold hail.

"Like hell I'll get hit!"

Using pillars of earth and foliage as cover, Takaya Jun continuously dodged the breath attacks. He kept Berta at a distance with devilish agility, making it seem like he wasn't carrying me under his arm at all. So long as he could maintain this distance, he could probably dodge forever.

"You won't get hit? Hmph, that goes both ways."

Berta had also been continuously avoiding direct hits from Takaya's magic. His sword didn't seem capable of creating more than a single pillar at a time. Still, there wasn't a gap between attacks to take advantage of. Using Takaya's incredible mana, the sword could unleash another pillar by the time Berta had dodged the previous one.

Berta couldn't evade them all on her own.

However, a green sludge wrapped around her body blocked the occasional hits she couldn't get away from. The monster called Caesar was likely Kudou's servant. The green defensive membrane scattered every time it was hit, but that was more than enough to buy Berta time to dodge. The fight had become a stalemate; neither side could deal a decisive blow. As long as they maintained this distance between them, that wouldn't change. Takaya Jun knew this better than anyone else. I could hear his teeth grinding together.

"Annoying..." he grumbled in a deep voice. "Annoying. Annoying! So damn annoying!"

"Urgh?!"

A sudden acceleration crushed my lungs as Takaya Jun charged forth impatiently.

"I'll kill you."

He went from prioritizing safety above all else to taking just the tiniest teaspoonful's worth of risk. That small change greatly tipped the scales of battle.

"Graawr!"

Berta spat flames from both her heads to intercept him. Takaya Jun created a pillar in front of him at the last second to defend against it.

"Raaah!"

He then kicked his own pillar over with astounding strength.

"Graah?!"

Berta's flames couldn't do anything more than scorch the falling pillar. The moment before it crushed her, she leaped to the side to avoid it. However, by that time, Takaya had run across the top of the collapsing pillar and was right by her side.

"Die."

He was well within range to use his sword. Takaya didn't specialize in magic, so this was actually his most lethal range. All I could do was watch the scene unfold before me.

He swung his sword. Berta came to a stop to try and intercept him, opening her jaws and baring her fangs. Atop her back, my master glared at Takaya. His face was stiff from the hopelessness of the situation. However, his eyes hadn't given up yet. On the contrary, his pursed lips almost seemed to be curved in a cocky smile.

"Wha—?!"

In that instant, a new figure jumped out from the shadow of the tree where Berta had stopped. Seeing the new arrival, Takaya Jun gasped. A pleated skirt fluttered in the wind. A beautiful slender sword glimmered in the light. Glamorous long black hair drew a trail through the air, and honest eyes reflected the insane boy's image.

“U-Uooooh?!” Takaya Jun shrieked and leaped back with all his strength. “N-No way! Why are you here?!”

Dignified eyes glared at him. The situation had been overturned in an instant. That was perfectly natural. A heavy weight had just been placed on the scales of battle.

“Iino?! Why are you here?!”

The Skanda, Iino Yuna, one of the strongest fighters in this entire world, stood before the boy who had fallen into insanity.

Chapter 11: Battle of Attrition

~Lily's POV~

“Why? Why?!”

Takaya Jun ran through the mountain while carrying my chained body in one arm. He was retreating, but he wasn't keeping an eye on his enemy. He recklessly dashed away with all his might. I could sense Berta hot on his heels. When it came to a footrace instead of a head-on battle, it seemed the wolf was just about his equal. She maintained a reasonable distance while spitting out fire and hail every now and then.

It would be over the moment Berta caught up to him. Takaya was desperate because he knew this. It wasn't the wolf he was terrified of, though. What truly frightened him was that if Berta caught up and it turned into a fight, he would have to stop running.

“Why?! Why?! Why, why, why, why, why?!”

“Gh...”

He ran at full speed without a care for the pain he caused me.

“This is impossible! Why is Iino helping Majima?!”

Takaya's judgment and reaction had been expedient. When he saw Iino, he'd thrown up a pillar as a smokescreen and immediately ran away. It was a remarkably swift decision. That was how utterly afraid he was of her. Given the difference in their abilities, it was perfectly natural he'd go that route.

Besides, thinking back on it now, I realized Takaya had exhibited similar behaviors up until now. For example, when I lost consciousness, he hadn't harmed my master. Takaya was perfectly capable of killing him if he were so inclined, but he hadn't. After he captured me, he'd retreated before my master could even get close. Taking into account his calculated behavior, it was difficult to imagine that he'd let my master off because of some moral code, let alone basic human sympathy. He must have had another reason for doing so.

That reason was Iino Yuna. He was afraid of the Skanda, who'd been with my master at the time, so he'd prioritized withdrawing without getting too close. He was doing the same thing right now.

“A-Anyway! I have to get farther away!” Takaya cried.

“You won't escape.”

“Eek?!”

Iino appeared in Takaya's path, causing him to change course in a panic. Even though he had been frantic to get away, she'd made it ahead of him. That was to be expected. Iino was the fastest in the exploration team. She might even be the fastest in the world. She was the enforcer of justice. Without a miracle, it was impossible to escape her.

Despite knowing this, Takaya continued to run. He was insane, but he could still make calculated decisions. He knew he couldn't win against her. If it came to a fight, she would trounce him before he could even do a thing. His only choice was to run away, praying for fate to step in.

"Nooooo!"

Every time Iino appeared, Takaya shrieked and changed directions. He continued running recklessly, driven by the fear of losing his reason for living. His mind needed Mizushima Miho to exist, and he'd discovered her within me. For him, this situation was an incarnation of despair. That was why he poured his entire body and soul into shaking off the hopelessness coiling around him. He'd even lost his concern for the "Mizushima Miho" he was carrying in his arm.

"Agh... Ugh... Urgh..."

Because I'd lost my strength, the speed of his flight placed a considerable burden on me. The recoil from his inhuman strength as he dashed across the ground shook my innards. The thickets he charged through tore at my soft skin. The shaking made me want to vomit. All in all...it was pretty bad. I was gradually losing consciousness. If this went on for too long, I would seriously pass out.

Just as I wondered how long this would continue, another thought came to mind.

"Huh...?"

I knit my brows. Something felt out of place. But...what? I gave it some thought, my mind still in a haze. Being carried around and unable to do anything, I at least had plenty of time to think. Yes. That was it. I had *too* much time.

"Oh."

Just then, I realized what was bothering me. This chase kept going on and on and on. That was weird.

"No! Never! I'm not handing Miho over! I'm never losing her again!"

Takaya was desperate, but he was already checkmated. I mean, he was a warrior, but Iino was so powerful the others had given her a nickname. The difference between them was night and day. Considering their shared affinity for close combat rather than magic, his continued flight was impossible. She could end this at any moment. The Skanda was just that strong. It wasn't like her to toy

with her prey like this.

“Eeek!”

Takaya kept running, screaming for the umpteenth time when Iino cut him off. No matter how many times he repeated this, the miracle he was hoping for didn’t come. His attempt to escape signaled the end of this chase.

Takaya twisted awkwardly and jumped back. He had finally gotten caught.

“Wh-What is this crap?!”

White spider threads coiled around his body. This was obviously no natural phenomenon, not that Takaya had the composure to consider that. The fact that he’d jumped into this trap meant that he’d been driven to such lengths that he hadn’t even looked where he was jumping to.

“F-Fuck!”

It wasn’t easy to bind a warrior. Takaya used his brute strength to uproot the trees the threads were anchored to. In just a few more seconds, he’d be able to tear the threads around his body. However, with the Skanda hot on his heels, those few seconds would prove fatal. He couldn’t escape anymore.

“Aaaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaah!”

Takaya screamed as if dying in agony. That unshackled something within him. His already tenuous mind even lost the ability to think normally. He put up a meaningless struggle that was better off not being attempted at all.

Takaya Jun poured all the mana he could muster as a warrior into his bejeweled sword.

“Eat thiiiiis!”

The pillar of earth rushed toward Iino Yuna, her slender sword held at the ready—and it smashed into her.

“Huh?” he muttered in astonishment. “What...is that?”

Iino’s crushed body had turned into a pitch-black shadow. This was a phenomenon Takaya had likely heard about. Nonetheless, it was difficult for him to tie the image before him to the knowledge in his mind.

I could tell exactly what this was right away since I’d seen it before. It was a doppelganger. Now that I thought about it, my master had accepted Kudou Riku’s help. One of Kudou’s servants was the doppelqueen Anton, who was capable of spawning many doppelgangers. This was definitely one of her spawns.

At this point, I had a grasp of what was going on. The reason Iino was uncharacteristically toying around with him in this game of tag was because these were all empty husks taking her form.

Iino hadn’t been going around and cutting off Takaya everywhere

he went. Berta had simply guided him to places where doppelgangers were already lying in wait. This was the skill of a hunter, and Berta was a wolf. She definitely excelled at such things.

Now that I knew what was going on, many things made more sense. My memory was a little vague from being knocked out, but when I last saw Iino, her leg was injured. She would've needed a skilled healer before she could run around. I had no way of knowing whether one of Kudou's servants could use healing magic, but if one of them could, then my master wouldn't still have his small injuries.

Furthermore, Iino had been hostile toward my master. Takaya had said it would be impossible for them to work together. He was right, in that regard. So long as nothing major happened, it was difficult to believe she would help my master. All of this had been a setup. The real battle was just beginning.

"Welcome, Takaya," a voice said from behind him. "I'll have you return my elder sister now."

My master's strongest servant, the Great White Spider, bared her fangs. She'd lost her astounding mobility due to the wounds she'd suffered in the battle against Iino, but that wasn't much of a handicap if her opponent leapt right into her reach.

"Y-You f—?!"

"Shyaaaah!"

Takaya swept his sword and turned around, but Gerbera had anticipated this move. She thrust out her leg, piercing his upper arm.

"Gyaaah?!"

His scream resounded through the mountains. The magic sword flew from his hand. I held my breath as I watched it tumble off somewhere.

Amazing... Really. They're so amazing. I never thought they'd corner a cheater like this. At this rate, maybe... The moment that thought crossed my mind, a beastly roar pierced my eardrums.

"Not yeeeeet!"

"What?!"

Gerbera's red eyes shot open. Takaya Jun had yet to give up.

"Oomph?!"

He aimed a kick right into Gerbera's chest. In the blink of an eye, her white figure smashed through multiple slender branches and vanished into the trees.

"No way..."

It all happened in an instant. Had Takaya's tenacious will stirred him up to such a terrifying degree? He had done this while Gerbera's leg was still in him, and now his right arm was half torn off. His persistence, which showed no care for his own safety, had caught Gerbera by surprise and repulsed my master's ace in the hole.

“Graaaaawr!”

Without even a moment’s pause, Berta charged in. But it was no good. She was a step too late.

“Outta the way!”

“Grah?!”

Berta ate a roundhouse kick while trying to spit her flames and fell to the ground.

“Wh-Whoa?!”

As a result, my master and Kudou fell to the ground. The two of them, tied together by Asarina, tumbled as one.

“Wasting my fucking time,” Takaya mumbled, turning to face them.

His joyful expression trembled with the expectation of the brutality to come. Fear ran across my entire body. He was mentally exhausted, without his weapon, and could only use one arm, but there was nothing stopping him from kicking my master and Kudou Riku to death.

What was I even doing? How could I just watch and do nothing while my master faced such danger? It was pathetic. How could I even call myself my master’s first servant? Cursing myself didn’t do anything to change the ruthless reality before me, however. No matter how much I disparaged my powerlessness, I couldn’t do anything about my bindings.

“Noooooooo!” I screamed.

“Diiiiiii!” Takaya howled, winding up to kick at my master and Kudou on the ground with victory in mind.

The two monster tamers, having lost the servants they depended on, had nothing to defend themselves with. That was to be expected at this point—which was exactly why both Takaya and I couldn’t understand the reality before our eyes.

“Huh...?”

In the next instant, a sword flashed horizontally across Takaya’s chest. One beat later, a vivid spurt of blood gushed out. He fell to his knees, unable to finish his kick.

“What...the...?”

He looked up in a daze and saw “Kudou” brandishing a slender sword. My master was still holding Kudou from behind. The sharp movement from the attack had flung open the mantle Kudou was wearing—revealing the girl hiding underneath it. She was down on one knee, a bandage wrapped around her left thigh. I now understood why they had been riding Berta.

“Iino...? The real...Iino...?”

“Sorry, Takaya. I won’t let anyone die here.”

Iino Yuna pulled back the hood that had been obscuring her face.

She looked at the now-twisted Takaya Jun with sorrow in her eyes.



Chapter 12: The Result of Negotiations

Shortly after Kudou had offered to help rescue Lily...

The moment Kudou told us we could ride Berta, I decided to stop back where Rose and the others were. I'd planned on chasing Takaya by foot, but I was a little worried whether we could actually catch up to him like that. However, our transit time would be drastically shorter thanks to Berta's overwhelming speed and stamina.

Furthermore, we had the monsters Kudou had already sent in pursuit. According to Iino, Takaya wasn't particularly strong for a member of the exploration team. It was safe to assume the monsters could at least slow him down. Having said that, it would take too much time to go all the way back to where Shiran and Kei were waiting. If we got too far away, the mental path might cut off, but we still had time to go back to where Rose was.

I took the same path I came from...fully prepared for the quarrel that was awaiting me.



Sure enough, the moment I appeared riding atop Berta, Iino roared at me.

"What's the meaning of this?!"

She drew closer, her injured leg clearly impeding her movements. But even as she sidled across the dirt on her knees, I stood my ground. She grabbed my collar and pulled me down to her level, suffocating me a little with her grip. As expected of a cheater, her strength was inconceivable compared to mine.

"Unhand my—"

Rose was indignant, still lying down atop Katou's knees. Even with her figure tragically reduced to her upper body, she had plenty of fighting spirit. She reached for her ax, but I signaled her with my eyes to stop. Asarina also stretched out of my hand to snap at Iino's ear, but I kept her at bay as well. Then I turned to face Iino once more.

"Listen to me, Iino," I said.

"Hmm. And what kind of excuse do you plan on making now?" she asked, a strong glint in her eyes. "You really are colluding with Kudou!"

Well, it was pretty easy to misunderstand the situation here. Incidentally, I hadn't brought Kudou with me. It was crystal clear what would happen if he were to meet Iino face-to-face. To avoid any unnecessary confrontation, I'd borrowed Berta, Caesar, and a couple of Anton's spawns before splitting up from him. It seemed Iino had heard about the two-headed wolf who attacked Fort Tilia from Margrave Maclaurin's subordinate, Louis. She could tell at a glance that Berta was Kudou's servant.

I didn't have any intention of hiding it, anyway. This development was pretty much just what I had expected. In a sense, it made things faster. I remained optimistic and got the conversation moving.

"Just listen, okay? I can see why you'd think so, but don't jump to conclusions. Kudou is just lending me a hand so that I can save Lily."

"Like I can believe that!"

"I bet you can't, but I'm telling the truth. That's why I came back here."

"What do you mean?"

Seeing that I wasn't perturbed by her insistence, she looked at me with distrustful and cautious eyes.

"Let me get straight to the point. Iino, I'd like to ask for your help too."

"What?!"

Iino was hysterical. It must have been quite the shock. But her wide-open eyes gradually squinted.

"Hey, do you have a screw loose?" she asked.

I could tell from her voice and expression that she was seriously considering the state of my sanity. I hadn't come back here on a whim, after all.

"Yeah. I'm serious."

"I asked if you're insane... Hmm... I see. So you're serious. That means you've really gone nuts."

"That's harsh. Why do you say that?"

"Why? Isn't it obvious? Do you *really* think I'll help you?"

"Not at all," I answered, then shrugged. "I ended up accepting Kudou's help, but you're different from him. You have no reason to do so. I know that much already." I grabbed Iino's hand by the wrist. Her shoulders jolted at my touch. "You're the one who doesn't get it, Iino. I'm not crying for you to save me."

"You're not making sense. What're you trying to say?" she asked, faltering ever so slightly, but her competitive spirit immediately flared up as she scowled. "What do you plan on making me do, anyway?"

"*Make* you do...? No need to paint me like a bad guy. I simply came here to give you a proposal."

"A proposal?" she asked quizzically.

“Yeah. I’d like you to fight Takaya with me,” I said, watching her eyes shoot open. “This isn’t a bad offer for you. You’re the one who asked me whether I’m planning on fighting someone to the death over some monster, right? You don’t want us to, do you now? So do something about it yourself.”

“H-Hang on a sec!” Iino cried in a flustered voice. “A-Are you asking me to stop you two from killing each other?”

“Exactly. If you stop Takaya’s rampage with your own hands, there’d be no better outcome, right?”

“Th-That’s true, but my legs...”

Iino lowered her eyes. A bandage was wrapped around her left thigh, and she had a brace on her right ankle. I waited for her to look back up at me, then nodded.

“Right. Your prided legs are no good. That’s why you’re stuck here, unable to do a thing.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“But the situation is different now,” I said, turning to the two-headed wolf who brought me here. “You can still fight with your legs like that if you ride Berta, right?”

“Berta...?” Iino turned her gaze to the monster, paused for a few seconds, then gasped before whipping back to me. “Hey! Are you asking me to ride the monster that attacked Fort Tilia?!”

“You don’t want to? Then you can continue lazing around here doing nothing.”

“Ugh... Th-That’s...” she mumbled, her face all scrunched up.

“If you fight, maybe things will end without any deaths. If you don’t, either Takaya or myself is sure to die. Think it over carefully and decide on what you want to do.”

Iino let out an unintelligible groan. “Th-That’s... That’s cheating. T-Taking yourself... No, not just yourself, even your enemy as a hostage like this...”

“You can interpret it however you want, but just as I said, this isn’t a bad offer for you.”

“That’s true, but still...”

I wasn’t taking advantage of Iino’s weakness or forcing her to do something she didn’t want to do. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that I was giving her advice on how to accomplish her desires. She seemed to understand this too. Yet the reason she wasn’t responding in the affirmative right away was because *I* was the one to suggest it. The wheels of fate had deemed that we were to cross paths in the worst possible way.

“Just so you know... If you end up killing Takaya, I’ll turn on you on the spot, okay?” she suddenly said, biting on her lip. “Are you fine with that?”

“Meaning you won’t allow for any betrayal? That’s a relief. So long as Lily comes back to me, I don’t care what happens to him.”

“You don’t think anything of him?”

Her tone was filled with suspicion. From her perspective, my intentions were completely unreadable. Her opinion of me was based on a tremendous misunderstanding to begin with.

“Who said that? Of course I have a lousy opinion of him,” I replied, narrowing my eyes. Iino looked thoroughly confused. “What’s so surprising about that? I’m still human. piss me off and I’ll hold a grudge. It’s normal. You may have forgotten this, but I’ve got a grudge against you for punching me, just so you know.”

“Ugh... B-But, why then?”

“It’s simple. Getting Lily back is a hundred times more important.”

With our current forces, we stood a chance against a single warrior, depending on our tactics. If done well, we could even defeat him. However, what mattered was retrieving Lily. So long as we didn’t know what could happen, I wanted to have the Skanda’s cooperation. Being so weak, I didn’t have the luxury to worry about the root of all evil here.

“I don’t have any intention of losing what’s precious to me. What about you, Iino?”

“Huh? M-Me?”

“Yeah. What do you want to do? What’s precious to you? Give it some thought, then let me know.”

I had nothing else to say. Just as I’d told her, I’d come here to offer her a proposal. The decision was hers to make. She had to be the one to determine what was important to her.

“I...” she started, letting go of my collar and closing her eyes as if searching her soul. After a short moment, she gave me her answer. “I don’t want Takaya to die. I don’t want him to kill anyone either.”

Iino raised her head. I could see her unyielding spirit. Her resolute eyes reflected my image. It was a little strange to consider, but this was the first time we’d seen eye to eye.

“I won’t kill anyone. I’m the same as you in that I won’t yield on some things,” she said in a firm tone, her fist clenched in front of her heart. “Okay, Majima. I’ll help you.”

“It’s decided then.”

I was acting to save Lily. Iino was acting to stop Takaya. Our goals were different, and we were in no way friends, but our paths were the same. That made it possible for us to join forces. Our united front was now established.

“Okay, let’s put together a plan,” I said.

“Right.” She didn’t object and honestly nodded along. “Oh. Hey, Majima, before that, can I ask you something?”

Now that things were settled, there wasn't much meaning to idle chatter. Having said that, it could end up weighing on her mind during the battle with Takaya if left at large.

"Ask whatever you want, but try to keep it short," I told her.

"Sure. Umm, you came here because you believed I would agree to your proposal, right?"

"That's not the only reason...but yeah, that's true."

"Why were you so sure?"

Unlike before, there was no hostility or suspicion in her voice. She was asking purely out of curiosity. Perhaps that was what took me by surprise.

"Oh... Because..."

"Because?"

I scratched the back of my neck as Iino cocked her head. Honestly speaking, I didn't really want to tell her. Still, I'd said she could ask anything she wanted to. It would be insincere not to tell her. I let out a big sigh, then answered her question.

"Because you're definitely right. About not wanting anybody to die, I mean. It's the right thing to do."

She stared at me in silence.

"You'd never betray those feelings. That's what I believed," I added.

In the end, Iino Yuna was a truly virtuous person, an embodiment of justice. She was such a softhearted fool that she'd run all the way to a remote location despite there being nothing in it for her. I didn't doubt that her personality came from her innate goodness. That was the reason I'd proposed to join forces.

"You're lacking here and there, but you're a righteous soul. That's why I... Huh? What's up?" I asked, suddenly frowning.

"Huh? Oh, I mean..." Iino was pressing her hands against her red cheeks. She didn't notice when my expression turned even more bitter. "I-It's a little embarrassing to hear you suddenly say that. I was under the impression you hated me..."

"I do hate you."

"Huh?"

"Just so you know, I wasn't praising you or anything," I added, leaving her utterly astonished. "I said you're lacking here and there, didn't I? Now's as good a time as any, so let me get this off my chest. You should put more thought into things before taking action, dumbass."

"D-Dumbass?!"

"You're not going to get it until someone hammers it into that thick skull of yours. Nobody can keep up with your speed as it is. Stand still and think things over once in a while, dumbass."

“A-Again?!”

Katou, still supporting Rose’s body in her lap, shot a glance over to Iino, then exchanged looks with me.

“Sorry to interrupt while you’re in the middle of talking, but...” she said.

“It’s fine. We’re done here,” I replied.

“I still have things to say though,” Iino complained.

I ignored her protests and urged Katou to continue. “What is it?”

“About the plan to save Lily, umm...”

“Oh right, we have to put together a plan. Could you give me some advice, Katou?”

Katou looked slightly shocked by my request, but she immediately smiled. “Y-Yes! Of course!”

“Thanks, you’re a big help.”

“Huh? Wait a sec, Majima. You’re asking this girl for advice?” Iino asked incredulously.

“Yeah, that’s right. I mentioned that getting your help was only one reason for me coming back here, didn’t I? With the forces we have available now, it’ll be hard to save Lily and secure Takaya. Katou’s help is a necessity.”

“You sure do trust her. She’s not a monster or anything, is she?”

“I get what you’re saying, but she’s not. Katou is a bona fide human. It’s true that I put as much trust in her as I do my servants, though.”

“Senpai...”

Katou gasped. Her cheeks turned a little red, and her eyes got a little misty as she looked at me with passion. Her reaction was somewhat exaggerated, but it looked like she was delighted to hear my praise. I felt happy about this too.

I turned the conversation back to Iino. “I can guarantee her abilities. Your wounds should pretty much tell you everything you need to know, anyway.”

“That’s true,” Iino said, rubbing her injured leg. “That’s exactly why I’m a little worried, though.” She looked a little bitter about it.

After glancing at Iino, Katou uttered, “Iino is pretty much the only one who can block Takaya’s earth magic from the front, so how about we use her as a shield and charge in?”

“What do you take me for?!” Iino shrieked.

“I’m joking,” Katou casually admitted, then shook her head. “Well, it’s not an entirely bad idea, but it’s a bit of a waste. Iino’s strength really should be used at the critical moment to take down Takaya.”

“So it’s not a bad idea... Hey, Majima, is this really going to be okay?” Iino asked me.

I shrugged. If Katou were to tell me it was necessary, I wasn’t

opposed to Operation Skanda Shield, but it was kinder not to mention that.



After I got Iino on board, we all shared what information we had regarding the current status of my injured servants, the abilities of Kudou's servants I'd borrowed, and details on Takaya Jun. With that, we quickly put together a plan. In the end, we didn't go with Operation Skanda Shield. Iino looked quite relieved.

We quickly gave chase. Luckily, we managed to catch up to Takaya before he cleared the Kitrus Mountains. Having said that, we couldn't just launch ourselves at him; we needed to wait until Gerbera and Anton's spawns reached their designated locations. We kept a sufficient distance from Takaya as he took a break, waiting things out on pins and needles.

"My king's advance troops seem to have failed," Berta said as we waited. "Unfortunately, Takaya Jun isn't injured."

"You can tell? I can't even see him from here," I said.

"We're downwind from him..."

She could apparently gauge the situation by smell. I heard Kudou had sent around thirty monsters ahead of us. There were enough of them that they could possibly have killed Takaya with a successful surprise attack, but it turned out he was completely unharmed. They had failed in the worst way possible. Or perhaps Kudou underestimated the strength of a warrior too much.

"It reeks of blood," Berta muttered. "It seems there are no survivors."

"Berta..."

"Don't worry, Second King. There is no camaraderie among us."

One of Berta's heads turned my way. I couldn't sense any emotion in her indifferent tone.

"Those were mindless pawns. There's no way to feel comradeship with them. Also...regardless of my ego, I am merely another pawn for my king," she said, her tail wagging behind her. "It's my king's command. You may order us to our death, if you wish."

"Hey, Majima... This is kinda hard to listen to," Iino said, grimacing while sitting on Berta's back. With her injured leg, she had to stay up there even while we were waiting. "It's like watching a pet puppy wag its tail even though its owner is abusing it."

"That's a little unexpected. Do you like dogs?" I asked.

"I'd hardly call it unexpected. My friend bought a lot of them, so I went to play with them all the time. If she saw Berta, she might snap."

"What does 'pet' mean, woman?" Berta asked, turning a head up to look at Iino.

Surprisingly, she seemed interested in our conversation. The two of them started chatting, and I went over our contingency plans with Katou and Rose. Some time passed before one of Anton's spawns informed us that preparations were complete.

"Master. Best of fortune to you," Rose said, seeing me off as I straddled Berta and got moving, the desire to save Lily burning in my heart.



At the climax of the battle, our trump card crushed Takaya Jun.

"Sorry, Takaya. I won't let anyone die here," Iino swore to him.

She wouldn't let Takaya die, and she wouldn't let him kill me.

That was why she'd come here. She gradually lowered the tip of her slender blade. The movement was agonizingly sluggish, as if she couldn't endure the weight of the red liquid soaking it. Iino had cut down dozens of monsters to date, but this was presumably her first experience cutting a human. Punching and kicking someone was just an extension of a simple brawl. The vividness of cutting someone with a real blade was on an entirely different level. It carried a far heavier psychological burden, especially for someone like Iino. However, punching wouldn't have been enough to stop Takaya as he was now.

I supported Iino's body from behind as I looked down at Takaya kneeling. The laceration across his chest was deep. There was a large puddle of blood on the ground. It wasn't a fatal wound, yet it was impossible for him to continue fighting.

It wouldn't have been strange for a normal warrior to be down for the count after Gerbera crushed their right arm. If Iino weren't here, I'd probably be a lump of minced meat by now. We really had teetered on the edge in this battle.

"In any case, why did Takaya mention Todo...?" Iino muttered as I let her go.

I set her aside and stood up. "Lily..."

She was sprawled on the ground and groaning. When Takaya got cut, he had thrown Lily onto the hard ground. Normally, this would be nothing to her, but because of the manashackles wrapped around her body, her physique was substantially weakened. I suppressed my soaring spirits and took a step forward.

"...yet..."

Just then, I heard Lily squeeze out her voice.

"Not...yet..."

"Huh...?"

I froze. It wasn't that I understood what she was saying. A horrible premonition numbed my body.

"It's...not over...yet!" Lily screamed.

It's not over? What isn't? The moment I started thinking about it, a chill ran down my spine.

"G-Gaaargh..."

A creepy voice hung in the air, making meaningless noises.

"G-G-G-Gaaah..."

It was coming from Takaya, who wasn't supposed to have the strength to fight anymore. His body trembled as if he had the shakes, his head hung low.

"Gah... Grr... Argh..."

He grasped his face with his left hand. Enormous blood vessels protruded from his head. His nails gouged out his skin. It didn't seem like he could even feel pain.

"G-Gargh... Graaaaaaaah!"

Takaya screamed at the ground with an inhuman howl. An explosive amount of mana burst from his body. The mana changed into a dark light and wrapped around his ragged clothing. It was like the light itself was eating him.

A moment later, I learned that this was exactly what was happening. In but a second, the light vanished along with Takaya Jun. In his place was a single beast. It was about two meters tall, and its entire body was covered in bristles the color of a raging blaze. Its eyes popped out, now a cloudy yellow. Unevenly sized fangs jutted from its jaws, dripping with sticky drool.

The hideous fusion of man and beast arched back and howled madly at the sky. A shock ran through my skin. I felt a sense of oppression that I'd never experienced in the Woodlands. It felt like it could crush my very being.

"Ta...kaya...?" Iino barely wrung out, bringing me back from my stupefied state. "Are you...Takaya?"

Looking closer, the beast was wearing Takaya's tattered uniform. It was hard to tell because of its red fur, but there were deep wounds on its chest and right arm that were still spilling blood. This was definitely Takaya Jun.

This phenomenon wasn't entirely unknown to me. Back in the Colony, there was a cheater in the exploration team who could transform, Jinguuji Tomoya. He was nicknamed the Dragon. I'd heard he could change into an enormous divine-looking dragon at will.

At a glance, Takaya's cheat had turned him into a mad beast. Since he hadn't shown any signs of activating it until now, it could be that he couldn't control it by his own volition. Unlike mine, which was always active, this one only took form during emergencies.

During a crisis, Takaya gained a massive amount of power in exchange for losing all sense of reason. Maybe the reason his clothes were a tattered mess wasn't merely because of his forced march

through the Woodlands, but because of the way his body swelled when he transformed.

With such a hidden ace up his sleeve, it was easy to see how he had totally annihilated Kudou's thirty monsters. I should've paid more attention to Kudou's assertion that we wouldn't need to catch up if things went well. Takaya wasn't unharmed because Kudou had miscalculated, or because the raid had been carried out poorly. In fact, Kudou's monsters had done *too* well. As a result, Takaya had awakened the beast within and destroyed them.

We'd repeated the same mistake here. Still, it was strange. Takaya was supposed to be a run-of-the-mill warrior. At the very least, everyone thought of him that way. In other words, he'd spent that one month in the Colony behaving like a warrior.

It was possible he'd been hiding his ability, but he'd had no reason to do so when Mizushima Miho was still alive. That made it more likely that he'd acquired this ability after the Colony's destruction.

Both Kudou and I had only gained our ability to tame monsters some time after arriving in this world. So perhaps it was possible for a cheater who'd already awakened as a warrior to gain an inherent ability later.

Some suitable trigger was, of course, necessary for that to happen. Thinking of how few people possessed special abilities, this must've been a rare case. It had to be something as intense as what Kudou and I had gone through. In Takaya's case, this must've been the knowledge of Mizushima Miho's death. If so, it made perfect sense.

The powers we'd been granted as visitors were a reflection of a wish we each held deep within our souls. As such, Takaya Jun wished to become a mad beast. He wished to become a mindless brute. The childhood friend he'd staked his life to protect had been murdered. All he desired was strength. At the same time, he prayed that he could forget everything. If so, this was the *real* incarnation of Takaya Jun's despair.

"Graaaaawr!"

In the next instant, the mindless beast's huge arm swung mercilessly toward me.

Chapter 13: Battle with the Mad Beast

Takaya Jun, now a villainous beast, roared as he slammed his left arm down at me. It was a heavy swing. I'd already lost my concentration following what I thought was the battle's end, and I was shocked by his transformation. By the time I'd pulled myself together, his rock-like fist was already right next to my cheek.

The moment I thought I was done for, something yanked on the back of my collar.

"Majima!"

Someone pulled me back. A terrifying sound buzzed by my nose as Takaya's enormous fist passed through the air. I fell backward and hit the ground. I could see Iino's kneeling figure coming into view, but I also saw another blow coming down to destroy us. I heard a thunderous thud reminiscent of a traffic accident, followed by a throaty scream. It wasn't Iino. It was more akin to that of a beast, and it resonated in my stomach.

I didn't have the time to figure out what was going on, so I got my body moving. I'd be done for if I stayed put. I tumbled backward and leaped away from Takaya. Fortunately, he didn't attack again in the meantime. Back on my feet, I looked up and saw him screaming at the sky.

I looked over to the left hand he'd attacked me with. A slender, blood-drenched sword was wedged deep between his thick, hairy index and middle fingers. It was Iino's sword. I figured out what had happened one beat later. Iino had pulled me backward, and unable to evade in her current state, she had thrust her sword into the incoming fist.

I turned around and spotted Iino face down on the ground a small distance away. Judging by the sporadic blood trail, she had bounced and tumbled all the way there. Her right elbow was bent the wrong way, and blood was flowing from her head. I heard a slight groan spill from her lips, so she was at least alive, but seeing how unfocused her eyes were, she was practically unconscious.

Iino had said that she wouldn't let anyone die here. She was a dumbass, but not a liar. She had been true to her word. Her actions here had proved that. Nevertheless, this also marked the Skanda's withdrawal from the battle.

Now that I knew what had happened, I drew the pseudo-Damascus steel sword at my waist and faced Takaya. A prickling sweat ran down my cheek. This situation was tremendously bad.

“Master! Run!” Lily screamed.

She was behind the transformed Takaya, still bound with manashackles and on the ground. I couldn’t sense Gerbera coming back yet. Berta seemed to have lost consciousness and wasn’t budging. I was completely alone in this fight—well, not *completely* alone.

“Masss—ter! Ter!”

“Right. I’ve still got you with me, huh?”

Asarina purred as if trying to comfort me. I gave her a small smile, then glared at Takaya’s grotesque figure. He bit the hilt of the sword stuck in his left hand, yanked it out in one movement, then spat it out on the ground. His muddy yellow eyes then caught my figure. He opened his giant maw, showing a row of warped fangs, and let out a beastly roar. Sticky drool flew through the air and splattered on the dirt.

“Takaya... You’re not human right now.”

It’s fine, I told myself over and over. I smiled stiffly at him and strengthened the grip on my sword. It was still too soon to give in to despair. Fortunately, I could still properly prepare myself for battle, thanks to Iino’s actions. I had to calm down and observe my enemy.

The important thing here wasn’t the special ability Takaya Jun had invoked. I needed to focus on what hadn’t changed as much as what had. Two things stuck out to me: his tattered clothing and the wounds on his body. They were the same as before his transformation.

Takaya’s injuries hadn’t healed. There was a deep gash running across the right side of his chest that prevented him from moving around freely. His dominant arm was broken above the elbow. Furthermore, Iino had rendered his left fist useless.

Right now, Takaya’s transformation into this mad beast merely forced his broken body to move. Even if his physical abilities were boosted, he couldn’t bring out even half of his strength with that many injuries. Regardless of his inherent ability, he was still much weaker than the average warrior.

To put it simply, Takaya Jun was in a hopeless, irrecoverable position. The problem, though, was that he was still a tough opponent for me. Still, as he was now, victory wasn’t entirely out of sight.

Besides, after Gerbera and I had conveyed our feelings to each other, I was in the greatest shape of my life. Perhaps this was just my mental state, but I could still use it to my advantage here. Asarina was naturally in terrific condition as well, with her roots planted in my being.

With this, I would surely win. I believed I could. Still, despite my

optimism, I hadn't forgotten that Iino's attack hadn't defeated him. Nobody had expected Takaya to transform like this, so some amount of improvisation was necessary. Right now, I had no choice but to do this myself.

"Ooooh!"

Both Takaya and I roared and charged each other. Because of his wounds, Takaya's movements were sluggish. His right arm couldn't move from the elbow down. It was like he was dragging the right half of his body behind him. The only thing I had to watch for was his left hand, which couldn't form a fist anymore. Certainly, even with this handicap, a strike from that hand would be enough to put me down for the count. I had to dodge no matter what. I suppressed the tension in my body wreaking havoc on my stomach and lunged into the valley between life and death.

"Graaoooooooooh!"

Takaya howled and swung his left arm. By the time I read the trajectory of his attack, I'd hurled myself to the side. His attack was terrifyingly fast, though it was much slower compared to his original speed. Still, even with my mana-elevated body, I just barely managed to evade the blow.

"Oooh!"

Slipping through into his left flank, I slashed at his waist as I passed by. Despite the lessons from Shiran, my swordsmanship was still immature. Even so, such severe training wasn't for nothing. The sharp blade of Rose's masterwork, the pseudo-Damascus steel sword, carved a shallow cut across the beast's sturdy body. Of course, Takaya didn't even flinch from such a minor wound.

He swung his left arm back. I stooped down as low as I could. His backhand covered a wide area, but unfortunately for him, his large body worked against him. His arm was fairly high off the ground. I escaped beneath it and rose with force, bringing my blade up with me.

My sword cut across the shallow wound I'd given him earlier, carving a cross into Takaya's waist. Blood oozed from the wound. Takaya glared at me in irritation, when Asarina suddenly lashed out like a whip at his face.

"Masss—ter!"

She quickly wrapped her long body around his face several times, opened her mouth, and snapped down on his snout. Her bite didn't cause any visible damage, but it did seem to give him some pain. Takaya screamed and raised his hand to his face.

"Well done, Asarina!"

Using that opening, I got another attack in. Takaya roared in anger. He tore apart Asarina's vine, but her body regrew in an instant. I straightened myself back out and stood ready to battle the beast once

more.

“Oooh!”

I prioritized dodging my enemy's attacks, making sure not to leave an opening for him. I desperately continued this and gradually got far enough away that I could no longer see Lily and Iino's fallen figures. From this distance, neither of them would get caught up in the fighting.

I was growing more and more immersed in the sensation of the weapon in my hand and the ferocity of the threat before my eyes. My enemy was covered in thick fur and bulky muscles, so all the wounds I had dealt were superficial. Still, with enough repetition, the damage would accumulate. Moreover, Takaya was already injured. Blood was still flowing from the gash in his chest.

If I forced him to move about, it would exhaust him considerably. That was why I prioritized evading any attack that would take me down while getting in whatever hits I could. This was rather difficult for me...but it was possible. Without a doubt, having now fought him, I knew I had a chance of winning.

“Graaaah!”

Takaya was currently a berserker clad in a beast's skin. He had lost all sense of reason, which made his attacks extremely monotonous. Normally, he would be so fast and strong that this wouldn't be a problem, but with his heavy wounds, his monotony became something I could exploit.

Up until now, Gerbera's practical training had given me the means of evading attacks even when vomiting in pain, and Shiran's lessons had taught me how to shift my body weight and how to place my feet to swing my sword. Thanks to that, I could evade Takaya's constant attacks, though it would still be difficult.

“Uoooh!”

My balancing act of offense and defense dragged on. Would I be able to hang on until the end?

Suddenly, a terrifying chill ran down my spine. I could feel death approaching with certainty. My battle-focused senses screamed at me.

“Wha—?!”

In the next instant, an enormous arm came out of nowhere and obstructed my vision. I stopped my attack mid-swing and dove to the side, paying no heed to maintaining my posture. Asarina plunged into the ground to correct my course. I barely managed to evade the blow.

“Wh-What was that...?”

I had been a hair's breadth away from getting hit head-on.

Was I being careless? No, that's impossible. A surprise attack? That doesn't make sense... Did he get faster? Confused thoughts raced through my mind as I backed off to try and grasp the situation.

“Grrrrrawr!”

The mad beast bared his fangs and chased me. He was significantly faster than me and very quickly became the largest thing in my vision. No, that wasn't quite right...

“Are you kidding me?” I muttered, stupefied.

I wasn't just imagining things. Takaya really was growing larger. Of all things, his inherent ability could still go further. I had totally misread him. This Mad Lycanthropy, for lack of a better term, didn't just turn him into a senseless beast. The more he embraced his madness, the stronger he got. His yellow eyes grew so wide that I thought they'd pop out. The vast muscles covering his body swelled and tore apart the remnants of his uniform.

The tattered clothes flapped in the air as he charged me, falling away from his bristled skin. The reason his uniform had been a mess to begin with was because he grew when using Mad Lycanthropy. Up until now, he'd just barely managed to keep his uniform from tearing apart completely...meaning this was the first time he'd taken it this far.

The effect was overwhelming. He was clearly much faster than before. This wasn't just a boon to his elevated strength; it likely dulled the pain from his wounds too.

“Graaah!”

Takaya held his left arm high in the air. He was still quite a distance from me, but I instinctively sensed this was bad. I ignored all consequences and leaped back with all my strength. I still didn't make it in time. His enormous furry arm stretched out a remarkable distance. His growth had increased the range of his attacks considerably. I couldn't get away from this one.

“Urgh...?!”

Iino's sword had severely injured Takaya's left hand, so he struck my shield with his fingers instead of his fist.

“Gah!”

I couldn't brace myself, having just leaped back, and went flying backward. The impact was considerable, but it wasn't enough to significantly injure me. I could still prepare for his next attack after I landed. Coming to that conclusion immediately, I corrected my posture in midair to get ready...and met the eyes of a girl with pigtailed looking up at me. I passed over her head in an instant.

“Ugh...”

I was moments away from crashing into the ground, but I just barely managed to absorb the impact by using my entire body like a spring.

“S-Senpai...?”

I looked up, seeing Katou turn around to look my way. She was

holding Rose to her chest. Behind them I saw Lily, still bound by the manashackles but sitting up. A little further away, I saw Iino unconscious on the ground with blood oozing from her head.

Crap! I messed up big time. In the unlikely event that Iino wasn't able to stop Takaya, we'd planned for someone to keep his attention while Katou freed Lily on her own. Katou had been hiding far enough away from the fighting so that she wouldn't get caught in it before we got started.

After we lost our ace in the hole, I could tell through the mental path that Katou was on the move since she'd been carrying Rose's body with her. That was why I'd made sure to lure the maddened Takaya away from where Lily was. And yet, while escaping Takaya after he further descended into madness, I'd unknowingly come right back. This inevitably meant that the beast had come back here too.

"Graaah!"

Takaya roared and appeared right next to where Lily was sitting. She was pretty far away from me, with Katou between us.

"Shit!" I cursed, immediately breaking into a sprint.

Not yet! I can still fix this! If Takaya intended on attacking the new intruder, Katou, I could make it to her first considering our current speed. I could still protect her. But if he intended to secure Lily, I definitely wouldn't make it in time. However, Takaya couldn't use his right arm. If he had to carry Lily around, he would have to use his left arm. In that case, it would give me an advantage. I kept an eye on Takaya's movements, preparing to deal with either situation.

Just as I expected, Takaya's yellow eyes went over to Lily. I silently cheered. I had messed up earlier, but Takaya's mistake here compensated for mine. He would be better off leaving Lily for later, but he decided to prioritize her.

This was a definite lapse in judgment, but it was pretty easy to predict. Takaya had no sense of reason left; there was no way he could make any sound decisions. The rest was up to me.

Now then, what was Takaya going to do after securing Lily? Run away? Fight me? Regardless of his choice, I just had to hound him down. I readied myself for either eventuality and fixed my eyes on him. Takaya moved toward Lily, then raised his furry arm into the air.

Huh? Hang on. What? What the hell is he doing? Goose bumps ran down my skin. If I wasn't just seeing things, then he was preparing to pound his arm into the ground. But that was impossible. Why would Takaya attack Lily? In his eyes, she was Mizushima Miho, his precious childhood friend. So, why?

No way... I came to a conclusion and felt my soul freeze over. Had Takaya lost even that due to his Mad Lycanthropy? Had he gone toward Lily not because he was reacting to the sight of Mizushima

Miho, but because she was simply the closest?

Takaya's transformed state was strong enough to strike down the thirty monsters Kudou had set upon him. At that time, he hadn't laid a finger on Lily. He'd still had at least a fragment of reason that had prevented him from doing so. This was the first time his madness went this far. That meant he couldn't even reason with himself. In that case, Lily would...

Her face went pale as she suddenly turned my way.

"Sto—"

I stretched my hand out. She was so very far away. I would never reach her.

"Graaawr!"

Takaya unleashed a beastly roar and swung his arm down. There was nothing I could do about it. No matter how hard I pushed myself, there was a limit to what I could do alone. But I could never forget that I wasn't alone here.

"Sister!"

A girl's voice echoed in the air. The next instant, a pillar of earth shot up from the ground between Takaya and Lily. Takaya's arm plowed through the pillar on its way down. Lily yelped and tumbled to the ground, still bound by chains.

"Lily?!" I yelled, but she was face down on the ground and couldn't move. Thanks to the pillar, it looked like she'd avoided a direct hit and had merely lost consciousness.

Takaya's head swiveled about in irritation, looking for what had gotten in his way. His gaze fell upon Rose. Her body was missing from the waist down, and Katou was supporting her. In her hand was Takaya's bejeweled sword, the magic weapon known as the Landslide Blade. She'd apparently retrieved it at some point.



“I won’t let you kill her!” Rose declared gallantly, fanning Takaya’s anger.

Just as the beast was about to roar back at her...

“Shyaaah!”

A white spider came flying in. Takaya dodged her deadly thrust by ducking, but Gerbera kept her momentum and grappled his enormous body.

“You lowly beast! What were you trying to do to my sister?!”

Gerbera used her slender arms and the legs she had left to restrain both of Takaya’s arms. However, perhaps because of the hit she’d taken earlier, blood trickled from her mouth, and her movements were much duller than I’d ever seen. The way I used mana was very similar to her, so I could tell that her mana flow was a mess right now. It was possible she was suffering from internal hemorrhaging. Regardless, she tenaciously held on. She was a spider. Capturing prey and tying them up was her specialty.

I sensed more mana in action as another pillar shot out of the earth into Takaya’s abdomen. Rose was lending her support. She couldn’t unleash a nonstop barrage like Takaya could, but this allowed her to fight in her current state.

Their great efforts definitely slowed Takaya’s violence. Be that as it may, their wounded bodies had limits.

“Graaaah!”

“Hwah?!”

Takaya started by shaking off Gerbera. He grabbed her wrist with his furry hand and he swung her around like a toy before flinging her right at Rose and Katou. Having no lower body, Rose couldn’t move freely, and Katou’s reactions were far too slow.

“Mana!”

“Eep!”

Rose suddenly thrust Katou aside. Propelled into the air by the force of her push, Rose collided with the incoming spider.

“Oomph!”

“Urgh!”

The two of them entwined together and tumbled about. The magic sword fell to the ground with a thud.

Takaya let out an irritated groan and once more turned to face Lily. His muddy yellow eyes...met mine, glaring right back at him from up close.

“Grrr?”

“I made it...”

Using the precious time Gerbera and Rose had bought, I managed to run all the way up to Lily. Finally... I finally had her back. The

warmth in my arms even felt nostalgic. I wasn't going to let her go ever again.

I looked up at Takaya's beastly visage, high above me. He'd lost all reason. The only thing left was a burning madness that had to destroy the enemy—or the reality—right before him. In the end, even Mizushima Miho had vanished from his mind.

He was going to pulverize both me and Lily without any hesitation or guilt. Gerbera and Rose had really done their best, but there wasn't enough time for me to take Lily and escape. I couldn't fight with her in my arms either. And now that Takaya saw Lily as an enemy, I couldn't leave her here. Thus, I silently made my resolve, faced with the hopeless crisis before me.

Chapter 14: Entrusted Feelings (Fake) ~Lily's POV~

What on earth am I doing...? I floated about within an endless darkness, cradling my knees and questioning myself. My master was fighting a do-or-die battle against Takaya Jun, the boy who'd abducted me. I was supposed to be protecting my master, but now he was exposed to great danger *because* of me.

Even my dear sisters had paid no heed to their injuries and thrown themselves into battle. Such was the situation, but I was the only one who couldn't fight. I was helpless. I couldn't overpower the magic chains binding my body. I would need at least as much strength as Gerbera to do so. I couldn't do a thing.

Not a single thing...

How long had I spent in silent contemplation now? The concept of time likely didn't exist here. This space felt like it existed just for me to worry, suffer, and wallow in my powerlessness all on my own.

"What's wrong?"

A presence suddenly appeared, though I was supposed to be all alone. I raised my downcast eyes. There was a girl here now. There hadn't been anyone in the darkness earlier, but now a girl floated right in front me, her flaxen hair fluttering about as if underwater. I looked at her face, the face that looked exactly like mine...and gave her a half-hearted smile.

"You're late," I told her.

"Huh? You're not surprised?" she asked in astonishment.

"I thought you'd come."

"You predicted this?"

"Yeah..."

It was clear this was a continuation of the strange dream I'd had not too long ago. At the same time, it was easy to tell that this was no simple dream.

"My master told me about what happened when he brought Shiran back from becoming a ghoul," I said.

Back when my master saved Shiran's heart, he'd seen a strange world. What I was experiencing now was exactly the phenomenon he'd described to me. I could pretty much guess why this was happening too. There was a magic connection between my master and I. It was the cause behind this.

Either I'd wandered into here through the mental path, which was the source of this entire space, or maybe the space itself was what we called the mental path. I didn't know the specifics, but in any case, I was certain this wasn't a meaningless dream. As such, this girl couldn't be a mirage born of my mind.

"You're...Mizushima Miho, right?" I asked with conviction. That set things in motion. "Hm?!"

My body burst into flames. At the same time, the girl also turned into a fiery blaze. In an instant, we became two shining beacons floating in the darkness. There was a difference between our flames, though. My body was a red fire, whereas hers was a pale blue. This seemed to definitively prove we were different beings, which stirred up dark emotions deep in my heart.

"Hmmm."

The girl raised both her hands in front of her eyes, looking at the swaying blue fire they had become. She looked down at her fiery body, then back to me.

"I'm Mizushima Miho, huh? Why do you think so?"

She gave me a carefree smile. There was genuine interest in her eyes. She was always brimming with cheerful curiosity. That was the kind of girl she was, the kind anyone could come to like. As someone who wore her face, I knew her nature very well.

"This is normally a space only your master and his servants can come to, isn't it? Wouldn't it be strange for this 'Mizushima Miho' you speak of to be here?"

"Not at all," I replied with a shake of my head. "Didn't Takaya Jun say so? Mizushima Miho exists within me. If I can come here, it would make sense that she could too."

I couldn't deny what Takaya Jun had said. He could see the truth precisely because of his madness. Mizushima Miho certainly did exist within me. The fact that she had appeared before me like this was all the proof I needed. But what did that mean, exactly? It definitely had something to do with my special ability as a mimic slime.

"I always found it strange. My mimicry can replicate everything about my target. For example, I can even mimic the flaming breath of a firefang, something that would normally be impossible."

I recalled the words Shiran had told my master during our journey from Fort Tilia to the trade city Serrata, on that first evening we spent in a reclamation village.

"A monster's inherent abilities come from their particular flow of mana. For those who possess it, mana flows in a way that is unique to their species. No other monster can replicate that flow. That's why no monster or human can reproduce a monster's abilities. Normally, that is."

Even a ghouls mana flowed differently from the human it used to be. That was why Shiran was concerned about my master's mana, since it was the same as Gerbera's. Back then, the two of them had overlooked something though. The one who'd been listening to their conversation was an exception to all this.

"I can use other monsters' abilities that I shouldn't be able to use. That means I'm replicating the mana flow unique to other species. But that's usually impossible. So why can I do it?"

I couldn't claim it was my specialty as a monster. Having said that, up until today, I'd never had an answer to this question. That only stood to reason, though. Even humans had no idea how their own bodies worked until they dissected the bodies of the dead and thoroughly investigated them. In short, this was the same. By touching upon Mizushima Miho's existence like this, I started to understand what kind of creature I was for the very first time.

"Mana lies in the soul. That's where it flows from. Each monster's soul has its own peculiar shape, making the mana that flows out equally peculiar. Because of this, there are only two ways of changing your mana flow. One is changing the very nature of your soul, like a ghoul. The other...is gaining mana from an exterior source, like my master does with Gerbera."

In his case, mana flowed from Gerbera's soul into him using the mental path as a medium. But what about me? The Mizushima Miho in front of me was the very answer I sought.

"The true nature of my ability...is to collect souls."

In all likelihood, what we called "souls" remained in a corpse for a while before dispersing into the air. In regions dense with mana, these residual souls probably changed in nature, affixed themselves to the corpse they came from, and turned them into ghouls. Back when my master touched Shiran's body after she'd turned into a ghoul, he'd been able to successfully restore her heart because the soul in her body was still Shiran's.

This could explain why monsters gained mana from killing each other and eating the fallen. The corpse still contained a residue of the soul, allowing the predator to directly absorb the mana that would normally disperse into the air.

Things were a little different for me, though. As a mimic slime, I didn't absorb the souls I ate as mana; I stored a portion of them as they were within me. That was the true nature of a mimic slime's predation. The mana flowing from those souls manifested the special abilities I mimicked. That was how I could replicate the unique mana flow of different species.

In that case, I could also explain the girl here with me. This was Mizushima Miho's soul. It was good news for me.

“Mizushima Miho,” I said to the blue fire in front of me. “I’m sure I have to apologize to you. I mean, I practically hijacked your entire existence.”

She remained silent at this.

“So, I know it’s unreasonable to ask this of you...” I continued, “but there’s one thing I want you to do.”

“What is it?” she asked with a cock of her head.

“I want you to save my master.”

Her eyes widened. “Save Majima?”

“Mm. He’s fighting Takaya Jun right now.”

“I know, but...”

It seemed she understood the situation we were in, to a certain extent. It helped keep things brief.

“Takaya Jun already possessed a warrior’s enhanced abilities,” I said, “and now he’s even awakened to an inherent ability. Somehow, my master managed to ally himself with the Skanda, but the latent power Takaya drew out when they cornered him is clearly too much for them. At this rate, my master is sure to die soon...”

Currently, he was somehow hanging in there, but there was no telling how long his tightrope act could continue.

“That’s quite the absurd request,” the girl told me with a bitter smile.

“It’s not absurd.”

“It is. What can the dead Mizushima Miho do, anyway?”

“Plenty,” I said with certainty.

She looked at me quizzically as I slowly explained.

“There are many souls within me, including my own. However, it’s quite rare for any of them to maintain a form, let alone have a will separate from mine.”

“So...what of it?”

“You can’t tell? Two souls within me have wills. In other words, there’s no need for me to be *me*, right?”

Understanding and shock spread across the girl’s delicate features.

“You don’t mean...” she said.

“Mm. I’ll give you everything. Then you can go back to that world.”

By using my very being, Mizushima Miho could return to the physical realm. That was the hope I found in her existence.

“How about it? That should appeal to you.”

There was no way she could’ve predicted this. She kept silent for a while before saying anything.

“What do you plan on making Mizushima Miho do as a result of this?” she asked.

“Exactly as I said. I want you to save my master.”

“That’s impossible. Did you forget? Mizushima Miho died because she had no power. She can’t save Majima by returning.”

“Nope. That’s not true.” I shook my head. “I mean, you’re a visitor. You have extraordinary power hidden inside you.”

“There’s no point to such power if it remains hidden, is there now? You listening? Mizushima Miho never awakened to her cheat. She *couldn’t* awaken to it.”

“Because she didn’t have a wish deep in her soul?”

“Huh, so you do know,” she said, shrugging with a small sigh. “If it were so easy for people to awaken such powers, wouldn’t everyone have their own special abilities? But that isn’t the case. To put it frankly, the ones who activate their abilities right away are either simple idiots, true heroes, or monsters. The ones who activate them later are largely those who wish to escape absolute despair.”

She let out an even bigger sigh than before. Maybe she was recalling someone else. The blue flames surrounding her flickered as if to reveal her inner thoughts.

“Only a handful of people, the truly strong, obtained power through hope. Mizushima Miho wasn’t one of them. That’s why she died. It would have been different if she had been like you, with feelings so strong that you don’t mind throwing away your very existence for Majima’s sake.”

There was a tinge of envy in her voice. It brought an unexpected smile to my face.

“Ha ha. It’s no use in my case,” I said, shaking my head. “Or I suppose, it *was* no use.”

“You...”

“I tried my best, you know?”

My body only imitated that of a human. I didn’t need to sleep. I couldn’t even count how many times I’d spent entire evenings experimenting after my master had fallen asleep. I had tried, and tried, and tried, and failed in equal measure. Even with all that effort, I’d never managed to accomplish anything. So I had come to a certain realization.

“In the end, I’m just a fake. There are things I can never reach.”

I brought my hand up in front of my eyes. It was my hand, but it wasn’t. The same went for my face, my body, my hair, my legs—anything and everything about me was fake.

“No matter how much I concentrate on my feelings, I don’t have the right qualifications. I actually knew that from the very beginning...”

I’d known I was no good, but I’d wanted to try for my master. I’d tried my very best, but it would never be enough. That was all there was to it. Though cruel, the outcome was obvious.

“That’s why I’ll entrust it to the real thing.”

“Entrust?” the girl repeated quizzically. “But I already told you—”

“Mizushima Miho can’t fight? Nope. That’s not true.” I slowly shook my head. “I won’t leave your power hidden away.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I’ll give you my everything,” I said with a smile. “That includes all of my feelings, of course.”

I would entrust all of my feelings, this maddening love I had, to the real thing.

“I’m giving up my very existence here. Don’t tell me my feelings aren’t going to be enough for you.”

The real Mizushima Miho’s feelings weren’t strong enough. The fake I was didn’t have the right qualifications. All we had to do was put these two together. It was extremely simple. I just had to resolve myself to go through with it. With this, all the conditions were in place to save my master.

“You want to save Majima that badly?” the girl in front of me asked. “You’ll lose everything about yourself, you know?”

“I don’t care,” I answered without hesitation.

Mizushima Miho was to return to the physical realm by using me as a sacrifice. Then, with the only thing I would leave behind as a key, my passionate feelings, she would unleash her power as a visitor. I would lose everything about myself, but I would manage to protect my precious master. This was the one and only thing a fake like me could accomplish. I had no regrets.

“Please, save my master.”

The girl clad in blue flames folded her finger up to her lips and thought it over for a while. But, in truth, she only ever had one choice.

“I understand.”

In the end, she nodded. Her smile gave me peace of mind. I felt rewarded for my resolve. I was convinced this would save my master. Nothing could possibly give me more relief.

“Come now. Eat me.”

That was why I urged her on with a tranquil heart.

“Nope, not gonna do it.”

But her words completely halted my thoughts.

Chapter 15: Withheld Feelings (Real)

~Lily's POV~

“Huh?”

A confused murmur slipped through my lips.

“Uh...?”

And then another. My bewilderment shook this world of darkness. The girl in front of me stared back, carefully observing my every move.

“H-Hang on!”

What did she just tell me? I tried recalling to confirm whether I’d misheard her. No matter how I looked at it, however, she’d definitely refused.

“Why?”

I was at a complete loss. I was supposed to trade my existence so that Mizushima Miho could return to the physical realm. It was an ideal outcome for her. There was no reason for her to refuse. I’d never expected this response. Through great effort, I’d made my choice, but now I was utterly dumbfounded in equal measure.

“I mean, even if you ask me why...” she said, watching my reaction with a troubled smile. “To start with...I’m not Mizushima Miho.”

“Huh?”

She’d just overturned the major premise I’d based this entire decision on. My mind was once more absolutely blank.

“Why are you so surprised? Mizushima Miho is long dead. Isn’t that obvious? She’s nowhere to be found now.”

“Th-That’s... But...!” I somehow recovered from my stupefaction. “You’re standing right in front of me!”

“Hmm. In that case, you don’t need to pay attention to my presence,” she said, cocking her head as her blue flames swayed about. “I’m... How do I even put this? I’m something like leftover scraps.”

“L-Leftover scraps?”

“Yup. I’m just something left over by accident, something that doesn’t contain the original. You can’t call that ‘Mizushima Miho,’ can you now?”

She was referring to herself, but she spoke so casually. She looked disinterested, even. Her words were blunt. It was clear she was being

serious.

“Besides...” She flashed me a somewhat mean-spirited smile, a complete turnaround from her indifferent behavior so far. “If I were to take your feelings, would I really be able to use my powers as a visitor? Can you answer me that, Little Miss Slime, who’s nothing more than Mizushima Miho’s fake?”

There was a teasing tone to her voice now.

“Everything about you is fake, right?” she continued. “Doesn’t that mean I wouldn’t awaken any powers if I inherited them from you? In short, all of the feelings you devote to your precious master are flimsy fakes, aren’t they?”

“Th-That’s not true!” I yelled on reflex.

“Right?” she said with a grin. “So you shouldn’t vanish here.”

Her beautiful and kind expression robbed me of any objections.

“You aren’t Mizushima Miho’s inferior copy,” she stated. “I mean, you possess something that only belongs to you.” She paused, holding out her finger and pointing at the center of my chest. “‘What exactly am I?’ ‘Where is the real me?’ You’ve been worrying about all these things, but you know what? Those feelings are exactly what prove that the real you is right here. Since I’m nothing but mere scraps, I can’t eat you,” she said cheerfully. “Rather...you should be the one eating me. If you really want to save Majima, that is.”

“If I want to save him?” I asked, my tone doubtful.

“Yup, that’s right,” she answered with a carefree smile. “I mean, by doing so, you can obtain Mizushima Miho’s power as a visitor from another world.”

“What...?”

I was at a loss for words. I’d given up on that long ago. I had tried and tried to obtain it, but I’d never been able to grab it. I couldn’t believe that I could obtain it now just because someone told me I could.

“Wh-What do you mean? For starters, I’m—”

“A fake, so you can’t use a cheat? Nope. That’s not true,” she said, shaking her head. “I believe Mana already pointed this out to you before.”

“Katou did?” I asked, surprised by the unexpected name.

The girl nodded. “A mimic slime’s mimicry comes with a certain amount of degradation. It doesn’t mean you can’t; you can, but it’s incomplete. Do you remember her telling you this?”

“That’s...”

Katou had, in fact, said something like that.

The girl peered at my face as I hemmed and hawed. “Don’t tell me you forgot?”

“I didn’t. But...”

“Thought so. Still, you haven’t really given it proper thought, have you?”

I couldn’t deny that. Maybe the reason I couldn’t manifest a cheat wasn’t because of a limit to my mimicry, but because of something else entirely. Now that she mentioned it, I’d never seriously considered this. Just as I’d said, I didn’t actually forget Katou telling me this. Actually, I’d happened to think of it earlier today. But I’d only remembered the words; I hadn’t delved any deeper. I’d never tried to think it through. If so...

“I unconsciously gave up on that possibility?” I asked in shock.

“Well, there’s no helping that,” replied the scraps of a girl clad in blue flames. “The fact that you’re a fake weighs more heavily on you than anything else. It makes sense you’d assume that’s the cause. An inferiority complex isn’t all that easy to overcome.”

“Then what’s the real reason?” I asked, furrowing my brow. “I should be able to mimic the quality that allows Mizushima Miho to awaken a cheat. That’s what Katou told me. But I never managed to accomplish that.” I felt more and more pathetic as I spoke of it. “If something else is preventing me from doing so, then what is it?”

“I’m telling you, it’s your inferiority complex.”

“Huh...?” Her words caught me by surprise, and I stared at her. “An inferiority complex?”

“Yup. Since you couldn’t easily overcome it, you’ve unconsciously bound your heart with it,” she said in a reprimanding tone. “In a sense, there’s no stronger emotion than this.”

“So you’re saying this complex is hindering me from activating my ability?”

“Do you remember? Even warriors have a groundless conviction that they’re special, right? It’s the same logic.”

“If groundless conviction can grant power, then well-grounded denial can suppress it?”

“That’s the gist of it,” she said, bobbing her head in a quick nod. “Groundless conviction isn’t unconditionally a bad thing. You could say that kind of recklessness is a privilege of being young. Conversely, saying that you know your limits sounds nice and all, but when taken too far, it can rob you of your potential.”

“And that’s...me?”

As a monster who was nothing more than an imitation, I had often felt inferior. The feeling that I wasn’t suitable to be by my master’s side had always, always weighed on me.

Even though I’d managed to conquer my fear of parting from him after that evening in Fort Tilia, I’d never gotten rid of that complex. And now, it was an obstacle blocking my path.

“The reason leftover scraps like me are still here is partly due to

this too, you know?" she said kindly. I raised my face back up at her, realizing that I'd lowered it at some point. "You feel inferior to the real Mizushima Miho. That's because she's human. You believe a monster shouldn't be by Majima's side. There's no way he could love someone so jealous and envious. That's why you unconsciously refused the idea that Mizushima Miho's existence is sealed inside you. I'm here as a result."

The self-alleged scraps put their hand to their chest before continuing.

"If not, I would be like all the other souls here, dissolved within you without any form. In a sense, I'm undigested food," she said jokingly, giggling at the thought. "This is the same reason you can't mimic Mizushima Miho's inherent ability. You've been trying your best to get closer to the real Mizushima Miho, all while refusing the Mizushima Miho deep in your heart. Isn't it obvious that you can't use her ability like that?"

She held out her hand to me.

"So you have to finish eating your food. In a way, I'm a symbol of the Mizushima Miho that you've been refusing to acknowledge."

I didn't get the sense that she was lying. My instincts were telling me that she was right.

"There's no need to brood over it. You're simply returning something back to where it belongs. When you digest me, your mimicry will be complete."

I looked at her outstretched hand. If I took it, I would gain the means to save my master; I would obtain everything I'd hoped for with a simple action. There was no need for me to hesitate.

"Fine."

I reached out for her hand. The red flames wrapped around me stretched out into the darkness. Her blue flames illuminated my path, swaying about silently, waiting for me to engulf her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her curious voice shaking the darkness.

My hand had come to a stop. I didn't know why myself. There was no reason for me to hesitate, yet my arm wouldn't move. I felt like I was missing something here...something I couldn't possibly afford to overlook.

That conviction had stopped me at the critical moment. I raised my eyes and looked at the girl's face. She was smiling at me gently. Hers was the expression of someone who'd carved some sort of resolve deep in their heart.

"Ah..." I muttered quietly.

I felt the last piece of the puzzle click into place. Before I knew it, I had pulled back my hand. The girl looked at me in astonishment. I

clenched my fist in front of my chest. There was something I had to confirm.

“Can you tell me...just one thing?” I said, slowly opening my mouth. “Just now, you said the reason you’re still here is partly because of my inferiority complex, right?”

“What about it?” she asked curiously.

“So what about the other part?”

The girl stiffened, caught off guard by my question. Her reaction strengthened my conviction.

“The complex I have about Mizushima Miho refuses her existence. Because of that, you’re left here as...undigested food. That’s what you said, right?”

“Y-Yeah. That’s right.”

“But if that’s all, then isn’t it kinda weird? I mean, my mimicry starts with eating my prey. I ate Mizushima Miho, mimicked her, fell in love with my master...and only then did I envy her.” To put it simply, the order of events seemed off. “Before I ate her, I couldn’t feel jealousy. I couldn’t have denied Mizushima Miho back then. That means a leftover like you could never have come to exist. So isn’t there some other reason?”

She had intentionally kept this from me and had carelessly let it slip by using the word “partly.”

“Could you tell me about it?” I asked, taking a step forward.

The girl withdrew her hand, then groaned quietly.

“Mmm, that was a slip of the tongue,” she said, pursing her lips in shame.

She started scratching her cheek, perhaps as a way to hide her embarrassment.

“Do I really have to tell you?” she asked.

“I need to hear it.”

I stared right into her eyes. The girl with my face averted her gaze. Mine remained fixed on her. Several seconds passed in silence.

“It’s because your master wished for it,” she said with a resigned sigh, realizing that I wasn’t going to yield. “Majima wanted to dispel Mizushima Miho’s regrets. That’s why I didn’t disappear right away. That’s all there is to it.”

She smiled bashfully and avoided eye contact.

“I see,” I said with a sigh of my own. “Just as I thought...”

It was exactly the answer I’d expected to hear. Of course I would come to this conclusion; I’d been the one to grant my master’s unconscious wish. I could vividly recall the day I ate Mizushima Miho’s corpse. I would never forget the night I spent in that hut. That was the night I bonded with my master, the first night he accepted me and my love. But I hadn’t been the only one to bond with him that

night, nor the only one to share their love. That was why this girl remained here. It was also the reason she was trying to extinguish her existence now. The moment I realized this, my heart naturally came to a decision.

“I won’t eat you,” I told her.

“Huh?”

The girl who called herself leftover scraps turned her head and looked me in the eyes.

“Wh-Why?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“Because you’re trying to do the exact same thing I did.”

Once I realized this, it all made sense. Up until now, I’d pretty much never felt Mizushima Miho within me. Having said that, it wasn’t because she’d vanished, but because she’d been hiding. She’d been here all this time. So why show herself now? The reason was obvious.

“You revealed yourself to save my master, right?”

She was trying to disappear so she could save the man who had saved her, the man she’d once bonded with and loved. That was why I could understand her innermost thoughts.

“You also have feelings for my master, don’t you?” I asked.

She remained silent.

“And if you believe that it’s fine for you to go away for the sake of those feelings, even if you’re nothing more than leftovers, then those feelings are definitely far more than just scraps.”

The girl held her breath and covered her mouth with both hands. I couldn’t make out her complexion behind the blue flames, but she was probably blushing intensely. Finding this rather cute, I continued pushing.

“Even if you’re just a leftover, there’s no way you’re okay with vanishing.”

I pretty much told her exactly what she’d told me moments ago.

“What the heck... Is this revenge?”

“Maybe?”

I chuckled as she pouted, when a sudden thought came to mind. Was this girl really nothing more than Mizushima Miho’s leftover scraps? Just maybe, she was... In any case, the truth didn’t really matter anymore.

“Thanks to you, I’ve remembered something important. I’m my master’s servant. I love him. That’s why I need to be someone I can be proud of in front of him.”

What exactly was I? Where was the real me? I’d lost sight of myself, asking such questions, but there certainly was something in my heart that I could be proud of.

“You know what? I’ve watched my master closer than anyone else

all this time. I've seen him weak, suffering, and trying his best to overcome everything."

Just remembering it made my heart throb. That was how much I loved him. I was head over heels. That was why I wanted to be someone suitable for him.

"No matter what I do, I'm no more than an unsightly monster. I can't become human. That complex has become an obstacle blocking my path. In that case, I have to overcome it, face it head-on."

Just like my master had overcome his own trauma, I had to do the same to be suitable for him. Picking the easy choice was out of the question.

"I won't eat you," I declared once more, stretching my hand out to her.

"Are you sure?" she muttered.

She deemed herself nothing more than leftover scraps. She'd never dreamed things would turn out like this. Her wavering eyes reflected my figure. Her blue flame almost seemed like a candle guiding my path. She really did resemble me. Or I resembled her, not that it mattered anymore.

"Is it really okay for me to go with you?" she asked timidly, slowly raising her hand.

Her hand met mine, and our fingers intertwined. Blue and red flames mixed together. The distance between us shrank, and I pressed my forehead against hers.

"Ah..."

"Let's go together. Our master is waiting for us."

Our souls entangled as one. This probably should have been impossible. The blue and red fires mixed together without one engulfing the other. The purple flame born of this union began illuminating the endless darkness with an unprecedented brightness.



Chapter 16: Connected Hopes

The creature facing me could hardly be called “Takaya Jun” anymore. It no longer had a single hint of reason or wisdom. It raised its left arm, swollen to several times its original size, high overhead.

“Graaaaawr!”

The Mad Beast let out a war cry that pierced my eardrums. Its body was covered in wounds, and its right arm was completely broken. A deep gash that went all the way down to the bone ran along the right side of its chest. Countless cuts crisscrossed its entire body. With all those injuries, it couldn’t even bring out half of its full power. At most, I figured it could use twenty or thirty percent of it.

But now that I had Lily in my arms, I couldn’t escape this kind of attack. I couldn’t expect any aid from my fallen companions either. The word “hopeless” was made for situations like this. Still, I couldn’t give up. That was out of the question.

So what if it was hopeless? So what if it was impossible to survive this crisis? I would never yield to such a thing. I couldn’t get Lily back on my own to begin with. Gerbera had hung in there, despite her severe wounds. Rose had fought, even though she had no legs. Katou couldn’t even fight, yet she had carried Rose into danger.

Because of their desperate efforts, I was able to once more hold Lily in my arms. They had made that possible. I hadn’t done it on my own, so there was no way I could arbitrarily decide to give up. I had to struggle to the very end.

I was determined to continue. I began circulating my mana as fast as I possibly could. My right arm was carrying Lily, so the only armament available to me was the shield on my left arm. I couldn’t avoid the Mad Beast’s attack. My only choice was to bear the blow—I just needed the endurance to block a single strike.

Mana constantly enhanced my body during battle, but that wouldn’t be anywhere near enough. I pictured the ultimate monster of the Depths, the Great White Spider. With Gerbera’s herculean strength, which she had used to face Juumonji Tatsuya, I could endure a single strike from the Mad Beast.

Having said that, no human could reach her level. No, not only humans, but no monster could either. She was the strongest high monster of the Depths. The savior legends even wrote stories about her. Still, things were a little different in my case.

My mana imitated the flow of Gerbera's mana. In this world, specific phenomena occurred depending on how mana flowed. Since my mana flowed the same way Gerbera's did, it was theoretically possible that I could replicate the Great White Spider's enhanced physical abilities.

Of course, considering the massive difference between our abilities, it would be unrealistic to use that much mana on a continual basis. But what about for a single instant? If I increased my output to the same level as Gerbera for just a moment, wouldn't it be possible?

I was in the best shape of my life, so much so that I found it rather mysterious. As I was now, I could even consider an outrageous idea like this. I could do it; I strongly believed in myself. I pictured the girl in white who had entangled my heart with her threads. I pictured her ferocious, beautiful, and bewitching figure on the battlefield.

The feeling from squeezing her tightly lingered in my arms. Her loving gaze remained burned in my mind. I felt her presence nearer to my heart now than I had in all the time we had spent together.

So I just had to imitate her. My heart pounded. My mana matched its rhythm and circulated through me. I replicated Gerbera's raging torrent of mana at the maximum speed possible down to my every extremity. Unprecedented strength powered my muscles. My bones were sturdier than ever, supporting this sudden surge of power. My nerves sent signals to every cell in me, demanding strength far beyond what I was capable of. This didn't even stop at me. Heat poured out my left arm where I held up my shield. The one other life living in me—Asarina—made her presence known.

Asarina was a parasite creeper, a variant of a plant-type monster from the Depths. She had mutated by feeding off me, a visitor from another world. Her biology was much like any other plant. An enormous tree couldn't grow on barren soil. No matter how much potential she had, she had a predetermined limit so long as her roots lay in a human like me.

However, that limit was higher now. Asarina complied with my will and evolved in the most optimal way possible for the situation. A sense of discomfort began spreading through my left arm. Her roots became an entirely separate organ from my muscles and bones, supporting my reinforced arm. I could feel them stretching up past my elbow and halfway up my bicep.

That wasn't all either. She wrapped around my arm like a snake from my wrist all the way to my shoulder. Asarina's body was both flexible and strong, so she reinforced my arm even further. Kudou Riku's servant, the dirty sludge Caesar, could raise another's defensive capabilities by using her sludge like an external shield. Here, Asarina was functioning like an external exoskeleton, amplifying my

endurance and strength. My left arm was now reinforced both inside and out.

With that final change, I heard something quietly snap within my body. Was it screaming because it couldn't cope with the sudden change? Or was it some auditory hallucination? Or maybe...

"Ooooooh!"

I bellowed to shake off my anxieties. I focused on the sensation of Lily's body in my right arm. She was soft, warm, and ever so dear to me. I prayed with all my will that I wouldn't lose her. That single thought drove any fear out of my heart.

"Graaah!"

The Mad Beast brought its tree-trunk-like arm down at me with a roar. I glared up at it and devoted every ounce of my strength into thrusting my shield forth. A beastly hand crashed into it in a head-on collision.

"Haaaaaah!"

The Mad Beast's strike was horrific, but my shield bash, powered by the Great White Spider's mana, was just as dreadful. The terrifying impact ran down my left arm and through my entire body.



My consciousness returned.

"Huh...?"

I couldn't grasp the situation right away. It seemed I had passed out for a second. I was still standing there with my left arm held out, my shield at the ready. My arms and legs were all in place. I still had Lily in my right arm. The Mad Beast was still facing me.

The moment before I'd lost consciousness, the Mad Beast had staggered back a step, as if it had slammed into an unexpected wall. This was the fruit of my all-or-nothing gambit. Or perhaps I should say that this was the *only* fruit.

From what I could see, the Mad Beast hadn't taken any damage. It was only staggering. It was just a little slow reacting to the unexpected event. As proof of that, it had only fallen back a single step, and the sole of its foot was planted firmly in the ground.

It unleashed a furious howl, its yellow eyes bloodshot. Its madness was increasing. Another attack was sure to come. Regardless of whether I chose to run or stand my ground, I had to act immediately.

"Hak!"

I struggled to breathe as blood surged up my throat. My diaphragm convulsed. I was numb all the way to my fingertips. I couldn't move properly. Furthermore, an abnormal exhaustion assaulted my entire body. My trembling knees buckled and I fell to the ground.

“Fuck...”

I gnashed my teeth and bit down on my own ineptitude, tasting the blood in my mouth. Gerbera could have easily fended off this wounded beast's attack and followed up with an immediate charge. Even in my peak condition, I couldn't use my mana to its full potential.

Furthermore, the difference in specs between Gerbera and me was likely a major factor. Normally, the Mad Beast's strike would crumple me like paper. The fact that it hadn't meant I'd gotten closer to Gerbera than ever before, even if just for a moment. Nevertheless, I was still far away from the Depths' Great White Spider.

“Grrrr!”

The Mad Beast once more raised its arm. This time, it would certainly end my life.

“Ugh...”

I took on a defensive posture, albeit a stiff one. I had no intention of giving up. I couldn't discard this one last hope created by my companions' actions. I tried lifting my arm, my shield feeling as heavy as lead, and then...

“It's okay now, Master.”

A quiet voice brushed against my ear, followed by a destructive clang. It was the sound of fetters breaking, the death cries of binding chains. With this, all of our hopes connected to their final bearer, the last link of the chain.

“Gyah?!”

The Mad Beast's humongous body blew back with a yelp. As I kneeled there on one knee, something supported my outstretched arm. It was a slender, soft, and reassuring sensation. This was the very first thing I had felt when I decided to survive in this world. It was the arm that had continued to protect me all this time.

The owner of the arm kicked off the ground, backing off somewhat from the Mad Beast. She gently lay me down on the ground as I smiled bitterly.

“In the end...you're the one saving me, huh?” I said. I had every intention of saving her...but it hadn't gone my way. “I'm pretty lame, aren't I?”

“No. That's not true.”

Now liberated from the manashackles, Lily shook her head. Her flaxen hair swayed in the wind. Her face, slightly dirtied by mud, displayed such a beautiful smile it looked like a flower in full bloom.

“Didn't I tell you before, Master?” she said. “I love the way you try your hardest for our sakes. That hasn't changed. Not now, not ever.”

“Lily...”

“You’re really cool, Master,” she said, running her fingers lovingly down my cheek. “I love you with all my heart. Leave the rest to us.”

With that, Lily rose to her feet. The enraged yellow eyes of the Mad Beast glared down at her dignified form.

“*We’ll* do something about that.”

Chapter 17: Surpassing the Limit

“We’ll do something about that,” Lily declared, pursing her lips tightly and staring down the Mad Beast.

For some reason, she looked different than usual. My eyes remained glued to her profile. Her expression was unyielding and dignified. She was acting true to herself, true to the facet of her that had constantly attracted my heart. This was the Lily I was used to seeing. Nothing was out of place. Was it just my imagination? Still, my mind was caught on something. Something was different in her eyes, something small enough it could be brushed off as a simple misunderstanding.

“Let’s go!” Lily yelled gallantly, encouraging herself forward.

“Graaaah!”

The Mad Beast also cried out, baring its brutal nature and charging toward her.



Lily stepped forward without any hesitation, though without her favorite spear in hand. They were both empty-handed. Be that as it may, the Mad Beast's arm was a dangerous weapon that could crush the human form into an unrecognizable shape. It wasn't something to face unarmed.

"Graaawr!"

The beast could no longer distinguish its targets from one another. Its giant arm, the very definition of a lethal weapon, came soaring down. Lily could still evade it. Without any weapon at hand, there was nothing she could do other than attract its attention and run around it. That was what I had done, so I thought she would do the same.

Lily, however, chose an unexpected approach. She planted her feet into the ground and stretched out her arm, almost casually.

"Graaah?!"

A surprised shriek followed a heavy thud. I was lost for words as I stared at the unfolding scene. Lily had caught the Mad Beast's attack one-handed.

That was impossible. Though she didn't look it, Lily was actually tremendously strong. The Mad Beast was on an entirely different level, though. Regardless of its wounds, it wasn't an opponent one could deal with head-on like this. It wasn't supposed to be, anyway. And yet Lily had done just that.

The scene before me seemed unbelievable...but that wasn't the most surprising part. Something even more shocking lay in my field of vision—Lily's hand that had stopped the Mad Beast's devastating attack.

Everything from her elbow down, which was normally elegant and slender, now resembled the Mad Beast before her. Lily's disproportionately large arm was something I'd seen before. It was the powerful arm of a rough rabbit, a monster from the Depths.

What's more, the tip of the rough rabbit's arm had turned into a giant turtle shell from the wrist down, which was what had caught the Mad Beast's blow. The shell was so large that it was resting on the ground. It was even larger than Lily's body and was likely from an armored tortoise, one of the many monsters Lily had eaten at Fort Tilia. The shell had splendidly fulfilled its role as a greatshield.

What was going on?

"Is that...partial mimicry?" I murmured in a daze.

Lily could mimic all sorts of abilities while maintaining her form as Mizushima Miho, but unless she took on the shape of the monster she was mimicking, the abilities went through significant degradation. Partial mimicry was an idea to fix that shortcoming. It was still an

incomplete technique, though. Lily had been stuck for a long time at the insurmountable wall of her limits. I knew very well how much she had agonized over it.

“She succeeded?”

Thinking back on it, how had Lily managed to break the magic chains binding her? She shouldn’t have been able to do it unless she had strength comparable to Gerbera’s. The fact that she’d managed to regain her freedom on her own was proof above all else that she’d surmounted that wall.

“Graaawr!”

The moment I saw the surface of the shell ripple, the roaring head of a firefang surged out of it. The gray wolf, composed only of its upper body, snapped at the Mad Beast’s elbow, piercing the beast’s skin with its sturdy fangs.

“Gaaaaah!”

The Mad Beast’s face contorted as it shook off the wolf through sheer force. The wolf crumbled to bits, and the fragments of meat transformed into slime, splattering across the ground. Now free from its bite, the Mad Beast tried to attack back, but six snakes came rushing at its head.

“Hsssss!”

Before I knew it, Lily’s left arm had transformed into multiple snakes. This came from a lesser Hydra, a monster from the Fringes. The Mad Beast was taken by surprise and fell back. It flailed its arm around while retreating, bashing the oncoming snakes and their poisonous fangs.

“Hngh!”

Lily, who had displayed a surging wave of nonstop attacks, stopped there. In the meantime, the Mad Beast regained its footing.

“Even with help, my simultaneous limit is four, huh?” Lily muttered to herself with a grimace.

Her new partial mimicry was powerful. Even if each individual monster wasn’t particularly strong by itself, focusing entirely on their specialties created a significant threat. Now that she could connect all these species together, she could stand on equal ground with Gerbera. Still, it seemed there was a limit.

“Graaaah!”

The Mad Beast, which functioned on pure instinct rather than intelligence, found some prospect for victory. It let out another war cry and charged at Lily. If there was a limit to how many tricks she had up her sleeve, then it merely had to overwhelm her with an attack that she couldn’t counter. I wasn’t sure whether the Mad Beast had actually thought it over that far, but that seemed to be its aim.

“Lily!” I shouted.

“I’m fine,” she replied, her back still turned to me.

She casually held up her arm toward the oncoming beast. There was strength in her smile.

“As we are now, we can overcome any limits.”

Oddly enough, this was the same decision I had made earlier. She was going to use her maximum power for a single instant—a definitive strike that didn’t pay heed to what came after. A terrifying amount of mana swelled up within her body.

“This is everything I’ve accumulated! Stop it if you can!”

In the next instant, a flood of monstrosities poured out of Lily’s palm. Each and every monster she’d ever eaten surged out as if they were coming from some comical toybox, swooping in on the Mad Beast. Its yellow eyes shot open and it ground to a halt. It was too late to avoid the oncoming tide, however.

It swung its massive arm, smashing aside the monsters at the front, but it was like swatting away a single droplet in a tsunami. The monsters behind them smashed into the Mad Beast’s enormous body. That impact alone wasn’t enough to take down this tenacious creature, but more and more monsters poured in one after the other. Even a sturdy rock capable of withstanding the force of heavy machinery could be washed away by a raging landslide. That was largely what I was witnessing here.

“G-Graaah?!”

The overwhelming weight was all it took to knock the Mad Beast over and trample it down. In the end, its monstrous body blew away like a leaf in the wind.



The surging mass of monsters vanished shortly after. They all lost their forms at once, turning into a viscous liquid and returning to Lily’s wrist. I stood there in shock, gulping at what I had witnessed, as Lily slowly lowered her arm. Her gambit had been as exhausting as it appeared. Her breathing was ragged. The tumult of battle that had engulfed the mountain we were on faded away. The leaves swayed in the wind, filling the silence alongside Lily’s labored breaths.

The moment I thought it was finally over, the Mad Beast suddenly opened its yellow eyes. It was still on the ground where it had collapsed far away.

“Graaah!” it bellowed, standing itself back up.

“It can still stand?!” I yelled in dumbfounded shock.

The Mad Beast had been reduced to a tattered rag. The simple act of standing caused blood to spurt from the wounds all over its body. Its broken right arm finally fell off and tumbled to the ground. From the very beginning, it had been forcing its body to move through any

pain. It was in no condition to fight. It was actually rather baffling that it could still stand.

“Graaaaaawr!”

Nevertheless, the Mad Beast continued growling. Blood splattered across the ground. This was practically suicide. If it continued its rampage, it would likely die before it could do anything to us. Takaya Jun’s inherent ability was perhaps one meant to hurt himself above all others. First his sense of reason, then his ego...and in the end, it would one day destroy him entirely.

Lily watched the snarling creature with sorrow in her eyes. “It’s useless,” she said. “I won’t be yours.”

Her voice was so tranquil and sad that it didn’t seem fitting in the midst of battle. I thought maybe she was conveying some sort of special emotion to the Mad Beast.

“Grrr...”

Suddenly, its growling grew quieter. Its muddy eyes stared at Lily. It was as if it was trying to confirm something. Lily suddenly turned my way. Her gaze...seemed different than usual.

“I’m going with him,” she said clearly, and once more turned to the Mad Beast. “So, Jun, I can’t be with you.”

It didn’t react. How could it? It no longer possessed the intellect to respond in any way. It wasn’t Takaya Jun anymore. It was just a monster now. The Mad Beast just stared at Lily and stopped moving. All of the hostility and malice it had built up until now were entirely gone.

Strangely enough, its gigantic body looked so empty now, as if it was made of papier-mâché. Seeing it like this, I finally knew that the fight was over.

The Mad Beast’s fur, which had been standing on end this entire time, settled down against its body, making it seem as if it had shrunk. Then it groaned quietly and leaped. It wasn’t dashing toward us, though; it had jumped backward. After throwing a glance our way, it turned its back to us with a single howl. That was the last we saw of it. The monster that had once been Takaya Jun vanished into the grove of trees.



“Master.”

I watched the Mad Beast vanish deep into the trees and turned to the voice calling out to me. Lily walked my way with a sad smile.

“Sorry, I couldn’t finish it,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied, shaking my head. “I think it’s better this way.”

Lily was clearly exhausted, and it wasn’t guaranteed that she

could've safely continued to fight. If it had come to that, the Mad Beast would have eventually died from its wounds, but some of us might have accompanied it on its way out. There was no reason for us to brave such danger. So long as everyone was all right, I was fine with it.

In that sense, it was just as I had said to Iino. Besides, I'd promised her that I wouldn't kill Takaya Jun. If it posed us no danger, I didn't mind letting the Mad Beast get away. Also, I could somehow sense that it would no longer bare its fangs at us.

It was no more than a beast now. I wasn't even sure if it could actually return to being Takaya Jun. It would live its life out somewhere and eventually die, just like any other monster.

Somewhere deep down, I felt relieved. Why was that? It was like I couldn't let Lily kill it as she was now. I didn't really know why I thought that way, though...

"What's up, Master?" Lily asked, cocking her head when she noticed me staring.

"It's nothing..."

In any case, the crisis was over and all was well. I was too tired to give it more thought. Honestly, now that all the tension had faded, I felt compelled to plop down right where I was. It was a bit of a pain that this wasn't really an option right now.

First, I had to check on my injured companions and help them with any necessary treatment. It didn't look like anyone had suffered any serious wounds, but that didn't mean I could just leave them as they were.

"Hey, Lily. Do you at least have enough mana to cast—"

I was trying to ask about healing magic when Lily collapsed into my chest.

"Huh?"

"Sorry, Master."

I could feel an abnormal amount of heat coming from her through her clothes.

"I think...I'm at...my limit..." she said between gasps.

"L-Lily?"

"Relax," she said, looking up at me, her face flushed and exhausted. She was doing her best to give me a smile. "I just need...a little...rest..."

And with that, all the strength left her body.

Chapter 18: Enigmatic Smile ~Mad Beast's POV~

I wandered aimlessly through the mountains, using routes that humans never tread. It wasn't particularly hard for me. I was used to walking down trackless paths. All I ever used lately were trails through dense forests.

I had memories, but despite how recent they were supposed to be, I could only remember fragments. Regardless, it proved that I had a past. I'd journeyed to seek help. I'd been starving, parched, and wounded. And still, I'd continued walking.

But what about now? What was I walking toward now? I didn't know. I had no destination. I didn't even have a purpose.

I didn't know. I just didn't know. I didn't know a single thing. I'd lost my ability to know.

"Something" inside me had been fatally lost. That was why I knew nothing now.

But wait...was that really true? Suddenly, I began to doubt. I didn't know what this doubt was, though. My mental faculties had degraded considerably, and I couldn't figure out what it was, but I still remembered the time when I first came to this world.



In the beginning, the only thing in my heart was bewilderment. But the moment I found out I was in another world, I was filled with excitement. When I found out that I'd also acquired power, my elation grew. I was especially thrilled when the leader of the exploration team, Nakajima Kojirou, addressed us.

"I won't accept a 'game over' like this."

"Everyone has to join forces."

"I need your strength. Come with us."

I couldn't remember what the exact situation had been, but I faintly recalled him saying those things to a large group. It was like something straight out of a grand adventure. Everyone who listened to him, including myself, engrossed themselves in battle. Our ordinary and boring lives were over. Something new and exciting had begun.

I became a member of the exploration team and started fighting to protect the Colony.

No...that wasn't quite right.

That wasn't right at all.

Fighting to protect others was just some kind of self-aggrandizing excuse.

It was fun.

I was simply having fun.

There were eccentrics among us, like Iino Yuna who genuinely fought with righteous indignation, but for the most part, everyone was like me. It was fun to wield such extraordinary power. It was exhilarating to mow down monsters with our own hands.

However, that exhilaration only lasted for the first week. After that, apprehension gradually took over. What was going to happen to us? Those thoughts spurred my anxiety until it became unbearable. Regardless, at least on the surface, I had to match what everyone else was doing. And all that brought me was pain.

Miho, who I'd known since childhood, probably saw through my inner turmoil. She was worried about me.

Right, I have Miho with me... Thus, I came to believe that I'd gained my power for the express reason of protecting Miho—to protect my first love. Some small part of me realized I was mistaken. I didn't try to protect Miho because I was in love with her. I fell in love with her because I needed a reason to protect her.

That was wrong. It was twisted. Be that as it may, all I could do was cling to those thoughts.

Maybe it was a given that I hadn't been able to protect her.

My desire to protect Miho had been askew from the beginning.

I didn't know what I should've been doing. I didn't know how I should've been acting. I had known nothing from the very beginning.

That was why I'd failed.

What should I have done, really?

What did I want to do?

I don't know. I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I don't know anything.

The only thing that came to mind was Miho's smile, now so very far away.

"How unsightly you are, Takaya Jun."

And as I continued walking with my mind in a haze, I heard a sudden voice, bringing me back to the present and halting my march.



A familiar boy stood in my path. Even if I weren't as enormous as I was now, I still would have thought he had a very slender build. By his side was a tall, virile boy. Well, a monster imitating one at least. To his other side was a shadowy humanoid monster with blades

instead of arms, watching me vigilantly. A dozen or so other monsters also gathered around him.

“Majima-senpai is so spectacular. That’s no exaggeration. There is no way a failure like you can possibly win against him. You don’t even know what you want to do, and you don’t understand your own wish.”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t understand what he was saying. All I knew was that he was making fun of me. It didn’t make me angry, though. Had I become so empty that even that basic emotion had left me? Or maybe I agreed with his reasons for making fun of me.

I didn’t know.

It didn’t really matter.

“Baring your fangs at Majima-senpai... Such a conceited sin deserves certain death.”

The boy casually raised his hand, and all the monsters around him stood at the ready. Their movements were organized, like those of trained soldiers. With a single command, they were sure to swoop down on me. There were over a dozen of them. I couldn’t possibly win in my wounded state.

Even though I knew this, I didn’t try to think of a way out. I didn’t even feel like complaining. Danger was before me, but my heart was as still as it could be. On the contrary, I actually felt relieved. All the pain, the suffering, the sorrow, the regret—everything would come to an end. That was why I didn’t try to run away. All I did was look down at the ground, defenseless.

The boy smiled, watching me stand there perfectly still with no reaction.

“Even if I leave you be, you’ll die in the not-so-distant future, but...I did find you here and all. I might as well finish you off right now.”

With this, it would all be over...

“That’s what I’d like to do, but killing you is a bit of a waste.”

The atmosphere suddenly changed. At the boy’s command, the monsters withdrew all at once. Regardless, I didn’t care. I didn’t react. I just continued standing there.

“There is worth in that power of yours.”

The boy held out his hand. I could see it at the edge of my vision. I still didn’t feel like reacting, though.

“You’re just going to rot away and die anyway. In that case, be of use to me instead.”

Nothing he said would change anything. I would just continue standing there until—

“If you do, I’ll grant your wish.”

I...I raised my head. For some reason, just those words managed to

slip their way into my consciousness.

“How about it?”

An enigmatic smile took shape on the boy’s slender face.



Even if I'd had any remaining intelligence, I wouldn't have been able to read his intentions. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. There wasn't a single thing about him that made me trust him. However, mysteriously enough, he didn't look like he was lying. That was why I listened to him.

"I promise you. If you become mine and work for me, I'll grant your wish one day."

The image of Miho's smile came to mind.

A wish.

My wish.

I wanted... I wanted to... Miho...

"Looks like you've decided."

By the time I realized it, it was already too late. I couldn't escape this boy's words.

"Cast away everything. Hand it all over to me."

His words violated my very being.

"That is the price of your wish."

"G-Grrr..."

What little I had left spilled from my grasp. My hazy consciousness came undone. I was already in the process of losing everything. It wouldn't have been much longer until I lost it all.

As my existence faded away...he affixed a "collar" around my neck.

"Oh. Just as I thought. My power really worked," the master of the collar said, looking up at me. "Heh heh heh. How amusing monsters are. What exactly are visitors from afar? No. What are humans to begin with? There's so much I still don't know about this world."

The boy continued to speak, but I could no longer tell what he was saying. The minute part within me that was still *me* was pretty much gone.

"My king, what are you thinking...?"

As I was on the verge of disappearing, I heard a voice. It sounded male, but it was also terrifyingly inorganic and emotionless.

"You claim the second king is not your enemy, but then you promise to grant this mad beast's wish. Which statement is true?"

"Who knows?" a mysterious voice replied with laughter. "I merely act to fulfill my goals."

I didn't understand.

In all likelihood, nobody in the world could understand him.

It all felt somehow sad to me.

Chapter 19: To My Beloved

When I woke up, I found myself lying on my back, looking up at the starry sky.

“Are you awake, Master?”

Still in a daze, I heard a voice call out to me. I swiveled my head to see Rose sitting on the ground, working away as always. Just a few hours ago, she didn’t have a lower body, but now she was back in perfect condition. Berta had managed to retrieve the bag of tools that we’d lost during the landslide. Rose had used the spare parts inside it to reassemble herself. This was one of the advantages of a puppet-type monster.

However, things weren’t so simple for everyone else. What really hurt us right now was that Lily, the only one who could use powerful grade 3 healing magic, was down for the count. Pretty much everyone was injured, so we couldn’t move about as we wanted to. We couldn’t even reunite with Shiran and Kei because we were now quite far away from them.

In the end, we’d asked Berta, whose wounds were relatively shallow, to go bring the two of them to us. After Shiran turned into a demilich, she couldn’t use healing magic. Given our current situation, the only one who could use healing magic, at a barely passable level, was Kei. Because of that, we’d asked her to start with Iino and Gerbera, who’d suffered the deepest wounds.

During her treatment, Iino had woken up, and we’d briefly explained what had happened. Surprisingly, after she quietly listened to our story, she’d quickly fallen back to sleep. Maybe she simply didn’t have the energy to react in any way. We would probably have to talk it over again with her tomorrow.

Gerbera was also exhausted from the battle, and she’d fallen asleep in the middle of her treatment. Her legs were folded up, and she was snoring away peacefully. Kei was curled up with Ayame in her arms, leaning against Gerbera’s leg and sleeping herself. This scene of meager happiness brought a smile to my face as I tried to stand up.

Just then, something pulled on my clothes. I looked down to find Katou lying next to me, close enough to make my heart pound.

“Mmm...”

She let out a defenseless moan. Her girly hand gripped the top of

my sleeve.



Now I remembered. Since my injuries had been relatively minor, Katou had cast healing magic on me. Because of her consistent training, she could now do so. Having said that, she could only use grade 1 magic. It sped up the natural healing process a little and worked slightly as an anesthetic, but its effects were rather limited. Even so, an accumulation of small stones could make a mountain. That was a bit of an exaggeration, but the repeated use of her magic had had a proper effect.

“Mana has been constantly casting healing magic on you, making sure to take rests every now and then,” Rose told me. “Please thank her later.”

“Sure thing.”

I gently removed her fingers from my clothes and stood up. Matching my movements, a shadow raised its head.

“Second King.”

“Berta?”

The two-headed wolf turned to face me.

“We’re really indebted to you,” I told her.

“It was my king’s command. Don’t concern yourself over it.”

Berta’s response was cold, but I shook my head to refute her. “So you say, but that doesn’t change the fact that you saved us.”

Berta remained silent.

“Thank you, Berta,” I said, then cocked my head. “What’s wrong?”

Both her pairs of eyes, filled with the light of intelligence, stared at me for a while.

“I already knew this, but you’re very different from my king,” Berta said, waving her tail about casually. “No... Never mind... My king has commanded me to see to your safety. Be at ease.”

Berta lay down on the ground, folded her forelegs, and rested both her heads on them. She closed her eyes, having no intention of conversing any further.

“Takahiro.”

I gazed at the tentacles waving around at Berta’s waist as Shiran called me from the other side of the campfire.

“Rose and Berta are with us,” she said, “and I will also warn everyone of any impending danger. Please leave things here to us.”

Shiran pointed up at the sprite dancing about in a happy-go-lucky manner and smiled. I smiled back, though a bit chagrined that she had seen through me so easily. I thanked her and stepped away from the campfire.



I walked off, guided by the mental path. The girl I was looking for

wasn't all that far away.

"Lily," I called out to her.

Lily, who was looking up at the sky, turned my way. The stars were at her back. I felt a sense of déjà vu watching her smile among the glittering scenery. It was a strange sensation. I knew this image from somewhere... As I thought of that, I looked at the sight before me and—

"You're awake, Master."

Her voice brought me back to reality. Before I knew it, that mysterious sensation had vanished. I scratched my head awkwardly.

"I see you've recovered enough to move about," I said.

"Aha ha. I'm still nowhere close to fully recovered, though," she replied, smiling.

There was no color to Lily's skin. Her upper body, shaped like a girl sprouting from her slime bottom, was totally transparent. Everything from her voluptuous breasts to the fascinating curves of her waist were made of slime.

"Master, how's your condition?"

"My body still feels a little heavy, but I'm mostly recovered. Katou put in her best effort and all."

I took a seat right next to where Lily's upper body was. This was a normal distance between us, one I'd gotten very used to. The only difference now was that Lily wasn't leaning against me.

She intertwined her fingers in front of her and quietly remained still. She lowered her eyes, keeping them fixed on her hands and her body below her waist. Her fingers weren't fully formed. It wasn't only her skin that hadn't taken shape, but also the minor details of her body.

I gave her a sidelong glance. "Hey Lily, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Did you awaken Mizushima Miho's...a visitor's power?"

During the battle with the Mad Beast, Lily had broken through the manashackles and participated in the fight. She'd then shattered the limits of her mimic slime abilities. The way she'd fought, using the many abilities of the Woodlands' monsters she'd eaten, was almost as extraordinary as the Great White Spider of the Depths.

Her last attack against the Mad Beast had been especially impressive. The weight of that single blow had even surpassed Gerbera's strength. All that together was enough for me to assume she'd acquired some new power.

"Mm. I did." Lily pulled back just slightly, a strange smile on her face. "Just having a wish deep within the soul will manifest an inherent ability... I've always been running away from my wish."

She once more looked up at the sky.

“All this time, I hated myself for being nothing more than an unsightly monster,” she continued. “However, I also accepted this aspect of myself in equal measure. I wanted to surpass my own walls, just like you did. That was the only way I could stand by your side with pride.”

She wanted to accept the unsightly monster she was. Was that Lily’s wish? A visitor’s inherent ability was a reflection of their own wish. While drawing out the monsters deep within her body and surpassing her limits through partial mimicry was one aspect of her ability, it was also a physical expression of her desire.

“I’m going to get much, much stronger,” Lily said, gazing off into the stars.

She still wasn’t used to her newly acquired power. Once she had grown accustomed to it, she would absolutely be much more capable in combat. But it was clear that wasn’t all she’d meant. Lily was going to continue walking down her path so that she could become someone suitable for her master. To that end, she believed she could become infinitely stronger. That conviction gave her power. That was her way as a servant.

“Seems like quite the hurdle, huh?” I muttered to myself bitterly.

To become a master suitable for her, I had to continue putting in just as much effort as she did. It really was a tall order. Not that it was a bad thing, though.

“Oh. Sorry,” Lily said, her earnest smile crumbling as she turned my way. “About not being able to use my magic right now, I mean. Even though everyone needs treatment...”

“There’s nothing to apologize for.”

Lily’s power was tremendous, but it had also exhausted her far more than anything before. That final attack she’d used against the Mad Beast had significantly burdened her body. She was so exhausted she couldn’t even use her regular mimicry right now, let alone her magic.

That was why she couldn’t form a human body right now. The price she’d paid balanced out the power she’d gained, I suppose. Or perhaps this was a part of the ability Lily now possessed, exposing her side as a monster and accepting that aspect of herself. That had been her wish, after all.

Seeing Lily giggle by my side, I—

“Mmmm?!”

—put my hand to her cheek and gave her a light kiss. Lily looked absolutely shocked by this. She was so surprised, in fact, that her upper body lost its shape for an instant. After sprouting back up, Lily held her lips with both hands and leaned back about fifty centimeters away from me.

“Wh-What are you doing?” she asked.

“Do you have to ask?” She was being so precious that it made me want to tease her. “Do you not want to?”

“I-I do, but...”

Lily waved both her hands. Slime dripped from her incomplete fingers. When she saw this, her expression clouded over.

“Actually, are you really okay with kissing me as I am right now...?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it gross?”

Oh, I get it now. She was worried about her current form, which was why she hadn’t snuggled up against me like she usually did. Now convinced of this, I moved over, sitting back down right up against her, and embraced her. The softness in my arms was different from that of a girl. There was a peculiar elasticity to it. The surface of her skin was silky smooth and chilly. I pressed my lips against hers. This too felt different from usual. I could taste Lily on my tongue.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha—?!” Lily shrieked.

I parted my lips from hers and stared at her point-blank. “Aren’t you a little *too* flustered?”

We’d kissed many times before this. Actually, we were close enough to sleep together. Even if my pounding chest and the crushing love I felt was the same as the first time we made love, it was odd for her to be so shaken by this level of affection after all this time.

“I mean...” Lily started weakly, the ends of her eyebrows drooping. “This is the first time you’ve been so proactive.”

So it was pretty much all my fault. I couldn’t say anything to that. It felt like she was calling me a spineless dolt, even though I knew she hadn’t meant it that way. Not that I could make any excuses...

Having said that, tonight was different. Sometimes it was important to express myself through actions rather than words. Lily had acknowledged herself as a monster and overcome the wall inside her. Her current state was a result of that. In that case, it was my role to accept her. No matter what Lily was, I would continue to love her forever. If doing so could help her accept herself, then...

“I love you, Lily.”

“I love you too, Master... From the bottom of my heart.”

I embraced my beloved monster in my arms and shared a deep kiss with her.

Extra Story 1: A Good Push ~Katou Mana's POV~

The file practically danced in her hands.

“You look like you’re in a good mood, Rose,” I said.

Rose kept to her work but turned my way. We were all alone right now, so she wasn’t wearing her mask. Her facial features still seemed inorganic, but she’d gotten rather good at smiling lately.

“Is your mood maybe because of Lily?” I asked.

Lily was currently recovering from the major incident that had happened the other day. Still, her bond with Majima-senpai had deepened because of it, so even though she still needed time to fully recover, her days passed by in happiness. I remembered how delighted Rose had been to see her older sister like that.

“You can see through me so easily, Mana. Yes, Lily is one reason for my mood.”

Rose stopped working and put down her file. I realized what she wanted and handed over a smaller file lying nearby.

“This one?” I asked.

I’d spent a lot of time watching Rose work, so I had a rough understanding of her process. I could now figure out what she was going to do next.

“Thank you, Mana.”

“You’re welcome.”

The fact that such a trivial exchange made me happy was something I’d only discovered after coming to this world. Thinking of how I’d once completely given up on happiness, times like these were an unexpected but prodigious boon to me.

“So, Rose, you said Lily is *one* reason?” I asked as Rose started filing again. “Meaning there’s another?”

“Yes. I was just thinking of Gerbera.”

“Aah...”

I hadn’t heard the exact details, but apparently Gerbera had expressed her feelings to Majima-senpai, and he’d reciprocated them. I was honestly a little surprised. He had a very typical...or rather, rigid, view of love. I was impressed that Gerbera had managed to get him to capitulate. The Great White Spider’s staggeringly destructive charge had quite the effect, it seemed.

This was something to celebrate. It was of course a great thing for

Gerbera, but it was also great for Rose. Gerbera had broken through Majima-senpai's rigid nature.

For Rose, who was fundamentally reserved and generally took a step back from things, this was good news. However, one could also say that she'd had the initiative taken away from her.

Rose didn't care the slightest bit about any of this. On the contrary, she was genuinely pleased that her little sister was happy. This was very much like her, and I found it quite charming, but I believed just a little panic would be good for her. At this rate, she wouldn't make any progress no matter how much time passed. Someone had to give her back a good push.

"Rose," I said after thinking it over, "isn't it about time you take off your mask in front of Majima-senpai?"

She dropped her file and it tumbled across her lap.

"What...did you say...?" I could practically hear rusty creaking as she turned her head stiffly toward me. "Show my master my face?"

"Yes. You can make some pretty normal expressions now, so I think it's about time."

Nothing would start until she took that one step forward. From what I could see, now that Rose was dressing like a woman, Majima-senpai was starting to be conscious of the fact that she was one. It was about time to try the next step.

"B-But it's still somewhat unnatural looking..."

"Stop saying that, Rose," I said, thrusting my finger at her face. "It's not a bad thing to be a perfectionist, but you won't get anywhere like that. There'll be no end to it if you criticize everything with such a high demand for perfection. You need to reach a point and stop."

I stared at Rose's daunted expression, a reflex she'd practiced numerous times. I knew very well how much effort she'd put into these expressions beneath her mask. There was a little peculiarity left, but that didn't take away from Rose's charm.

"But will it really be all right?" Rose asked, lowering her gaze to the ground. "Won't I offend my master?" she muttered helplessly.

Even though she was always so reliable, she had no confidence when it came to herself. She was so innocent, and it made her so sweet.

I stood up and walked over to Rose's side. I lowered myself to my knees and matched her eye level as she raised her head.

"It's okay. As you are now, there's nothing to be embarrassed about. I guarantee it."

"Mana..."

"On the contrary, you might make him go weak in the knees," I added jokingly.

"So long as Lily and Gerbera are around, I believe that is

unlikely,” Rose said, finally breaking into a smile. “You’re right. It would be rude to you to constantly doubt myself after you’ve helped me so much.” She paused, then gave me a reassuring nod. “Very well. I’ll gather my courage.”

“Do your best, Rose,” I replied, returning her nod as I smiled. “Now that it’s decided, I suppose we should discuss what needs to be done.”

“Yes. Could you verify with me one more time whether there’s anything strange about my expressions?”

“Of course. We need to be careful with our final adjustments, after all. There’s a ton of other stuff to do too. The new clothes we asked Gerbera for are already done, so all that’s left is to pick out the right accessories. The timing is also important...”

There was plenty to talk about. I really did find this fun. I wanted Majima-senpai to know all about this innocent and adorable facet of Rose as soon as possible. Thinking of the day that her efforts would be rewarded, I couldn’t suppress the exhilaration in my heart.



Extra Story 2: My Relationship With Him ~Iino Yuna's POV~

"It's just not healing..." I let out a small sigh, unable to bear my boredom.

There was a bandage wrapped around my outstretched leg.

After catching up to Majima Takahiro's party, I fought them...and by some twist of fate, I'd ended up in a joint struggle with them. A day had passed since then. The wound I'd suffered at Katou's hand still hadn't healed.

My body was sturdier than average. My frame was strong enough to support my outlandish speed. But I wasn't just a fast runner. My natural recovery speed was also faster than the norm. This was why I thought my own body was abnormal.

Despite this, Katou's knife had cut deep enough that my body couldn't heal itself easily. In this case, it should've been the knife's sharp edge that terrified me, but if pushed to say it, I was far more scared of the wielder's tenacity. In truth, I'd seen her in my dreams last night. I was scared she would show up again tonight.

"My apologies, madam," said Kei, the girl who had been casting healing magic on me. She looked troubled.

"Huh? What about?"

"It's taking a long time for you to recover because my abilities are insufficient."

So she said, but Kei's healing magic wasn't bad at all. I probably would've recovered completely by now with grade 3 healing magic, but I'd heard grade 2 healing magic was what the average specialist used. Considering her age, she was actually quite skilled. She was doing very well, going as far as taking breaks whenever her mana ran out, then continuing right away when she could.

"Kei, I don't think you have to worry about that," I said in as light a tone as I could. "I'm grateful you're treating me at all."

Not to borrow somebody else's words, but I could've been abandoned in the middle of the mountain with my wounds as they were. I shuddered at the thought. I couldn't thank Kei enough.

"Actually, I think you could afford to act a little more self-important," I added.

"I-I can't possibly do that!" Kei yelled, waving her hands about in a fluster and closing her eyes. "That would be far too disrespectful."

I couldn't suppress my twitching smile. There was a wall between Kei and me, one difficult to surmount. It was perfectly natural, since I was revered as a savior in this world. The reason it itched at my mind now was because I'd seen how close she looked with Majima whenever they talked.

It wasn't just Majima either. Kei also spoke with Katou like a normal girl. None of the locals had ever treated me like that. I'd never seen them treating any other visitors that way either. We were heroes here. That was all we *could* be. Something inside my head kept telling me this.

Maybe that was why a younger girl humbling herself before me, but not before Majima and Katou...made me realize how *wrong* that felt.

"Madam, um... You're not going to hurt Takahiro anymore, right?" Kei asked.

It felt even more wrong when she said such a thing with that courageous expression of hers.

"Kei," a reproachful voice said, cutting into our conversation. "Yuna has promised not to suddenly attack us after she's healed. It's rude to doubt her."

"S-Sorry, Shiran."

"There's no use in apologizing to me. Please forgive Kei's discourtesy, madam," Shiran said, her tone grave.

Next to her, Kei also lowered her head in a deep bow.

"Oh, um, don't worry about it. You don't need to apologize..." I said, waving my arms in front of me.

My arms then fell to my sides, pulled down by gravity. Their stiff attitudes toward me created a divide between us.

"I'm going for a walk," I said with a small sigh.

I stumbled my way to my feet as Kei widened her eyes.

"Huh? Are you all right, madam?" she asked.

"I can't run yet, but I can at least walk around slowly."

"But what if a monster shows up?"

"Not a problem at all. Even if I can't use my legs, I can still fend off any monsters."

My slender sword hung off my waist, and I also had Takaya's blade. Fort Ebenus had lent it to him, so I had decided to take responsibility and return it to them. Normally, it would be faster for me to run and hit my enemy than use some kind of long-distance attack, but as I was now, it was just about right for me.

"Be careful, madam."

Turning my back to her stiff and formal voice, one that felt like it maintained the unsurpassable distance between us, I walked off.



I walked along the riverside with my eyes to the ground. This was rehabilitation, in a sense. I could feel all the stress that had accumulated from being immobilized melting away. The Kitrus Mountains were actually a danger zone where monsters lived, but that wasn't really a problem for me. It would've felt great to dash through the wind, but unfortunately I couldn't do that right now.

It was the right choice to come out here for a change of pace. In addition to moving my body around, I felt liberated just from being on my own. Though I had promised that I wouldn't fight them anymore, Majima, his servants, and his travel companions were all still wary of me. It was uncomfortable being around them.

"Although, it makes sense that they're like that..." I mumbled to myself.

Yes. It made perfect sense. This wasn't just because I'd been their enemy at one point in time. Even now, there was something about Majima Takahiro that remained stuck in my mind. That was where the problem lay.

Of course, I didn't think of him as some inhuman beast. Majima wasn't a bad person. The reason I felt strange about it was, in a sense, because of the affection they all showed him. His servants were a given, but Shiran deeply trusted him, and Kei was genuinely attached to him. There was so much intimacy to their relationships that it shocked me. If Majima was in fact a villain, those elven girls, who each had such a pristine character, wouldn't have formed such a bond with him.

Above all else, I'd seen with my own eyes how Majima risked his life for his servants. After spending some time around him, I could easily imagine him desperately fighting in the same manner during the attack on Fort Tilia. At the very least, he wasn't the type to commit a crime to fulfill some selfish desire. That was an undeniable truth.

However, at the same time, one thing remained in the corner of my mind. To be brief, I still couldn't forgive him. The girls by his side probably sensed this too. That was why they were wary of me.

"Do you need something?" I said, bringing my dragging footsteps to a halt and turning around. A transparent girl stood before me. I felt my face twist a bit. In a way, she was exactly what I'd been thinking about. "You followed me, Lily?"

My voice was stiff. I felt a desire to reject her that I couldn't wipe away. It was the monster who'd stolen the late Mizushima Miho's form. Unlike when I first met her, I could tell she was a monster at a glance due to the aftereffects of the battle with Takaya. She was

wholly a slime in the shape of a girl. Having said that, she was still modeled after Mizushima Miho. That single truth pricked at my heart.

Back in my own world, I'd been acquainted with Mizushima Miho. She hadn't been part of my friend group, and we hadn't been close enough to go out together on weekends, but we'd chatted every now and then at school. Whenever I remembered her, I found I couldn't accept the monster before me.

"Did you have something to say to me?" I asked curtly.

I wasn't going to hide my attitude. This way, I could convey my displeasure. However, the girl showed no signs of shrinking back.

"Nope. *I* didn't have anything to say," she said, a slightly troubled smile taking shape on her transparent features.

"So why did you follow me?"

I glared at her suspiciously, and then her smile changed. It was only the slightest change...but a definitive one.

"I mean, it looks like you're not going to forgive Majima. I thought there was no choice but for me to come out. That's all."

Her words were incomprehensible, and I scowled at her. I thought she was making fun of me, so my tone grew rather thorny.

"What do you—"

In the middle of asking, I sensed something out of place and stopped. She had just said "Majima." Did his servant Lily ever refer to him by name? Besides...she'd said, "there was no choice but for me to come out?" Who? Come out of where? Her wording didn't make sense.

She stared at me, looking serious. The discomfort swelling within me came out of my mouth in the form of a question.

"Who are you?"

The girl before me was...different. A certain conviction began forming in my mind.

"I wonder? Who indeed?"

An impish giggle tickled my ear. It was a different girl's voice, one very similar to Lily's. I'd heard it before. Her smile drew my eyes toward her. How strange. This slimy representation of a girl felt far closer to the real Mizushima Miho than Lily's perfect mimicry. In other words...

"It can't be... Are you Mizushima? The real one?" I asked.

"Bingo," she answered ever so casually. She was acting just as I remembered her.

"No way... You're kidding me..." I murmured in a daze.

"I guess it's normal to be shocked. I mean, I never thought it'd turn out like this myself," she said, nodding repeatedly in agreement. "They say you never know what life has in store for you, but there's gotta be a limit, right?"

It really was Mizushima. Having said that, I still found it hard to

believe.

“What on earth ha—”

“Oh, sorry. Actually, I don’t really have that much time to chat,” Mizushima said, cutting me off apologetically. “I mean, I came out like this using mimicry, but I can’t maintain it all that long. Things might be different after I get used to it, but right now...you know.”

Mizushima’s sudden appearance shocked me, but apparently there were drawbacks. Given the limited time, we couldn’t talk about whatever we wanted.

“Do you mind if I get my business out of the way before my concentration breaks?” she asked.

“Your business? What is it?”

Even in all the confusion, I urged her forward. There was a lot I didn’t understand, but since she didn’t have the time, I had to give up on getting answers. I had to hear what she wanted to say.

Seeing that I was ready to listen, Mizushima gave me a satisfied nod and cut to the chase.

“I’d like to get rid of the tension between you and Majima.”

“What? Why would you...?” I said, bewildered by the unexpected statement.

Mizushima thought it over for a bit, trying to find the words to convince me.

“Hmmm. I mean, you got mad at Majima for my sake, right? Seeing you two get along so poorly because of that troubles me, you know?”

“How?”

“Um, how do I put this... I’m happy you got angry on my behalf, but I’m actually satisfied with my current circumstances.”

This confession overturned the very foundation of all of my assumptions.

“Satisfied? Huh? You’re not angry?”

“Nope.”

I didn’t really mean to ask, but she confirmed it with ease. It was as if she’d never really worried about it, like the answer was perfectly obvious to her. She didn’t seem intent on going into more detail, perhaps because of the lack of time, so I had no idea what had brought her to that conclusion. Nevertheless, I could tell she was being truthful.

“Sooo... There’s no reason for you to be angry at Majima, Iino.”

This was quite the shock. It completely changed my stance on Majima Takahiro. I couldn’t tell whether Mizushima realized this as she continued with a smile.

“Iino, I’d like for you to get along with him.”

“G-Get along?”

“Yup. You’re both so serious, so I think you’re actually pretty compatible.”

She had said it so casually, but the idea was outrageous. Or not. Maybe it wasn’t outrageous? I couldn’t tell anymore. My mind was a mess.

“How about it?” she asked.

“I don’t really know...”

I couldn’t find the words I wanted to say to her. I remained silent for a good ten seconds, when rustling leaves broke the awkward silence, causing my body to jolt.

“Oh, there you are, Lily,” Majima said as he came out of the thickets.

A girl with gray hair and a mask, probably serving as his guard, stood behind him.

“Huh. You were with Iino?” he said.

“Yup,” Lily answered.

The two of them started talking as if nothing had happened.

“What were you two up to?” he asked her.

“Hmmm. Nothing serious.”

The girl was no longer Mizushima Miho. Maybe she withdrew when Majima showed up. Or maybe she ran out of time.

“I saw Iino walk off, so I was a little worried and followed her,” Lily said.

“Um, Lily, you’re much weaker right now than she is, so I’d prefer if you kept still.”

“Kaaaay.”

Lily then turned my way. Making sure her face was at an angle where nobody else could see her, she mouthed, “It’s a secret.” Which girl was she now? Even though I didn’t know the answer, I nodded back to her, when I suddenly met Majima’s eyes.

“You too, Iino,” he said.

“Huh? ‘Me too’ what?”

“I know you don’t consider this place dangerous, but you’re still injured. You shouldn’t wander around carelessly on your own.”

He was grimacing, but he was just worried about me.

“Huh? Uhh...”

I was at a loss for words because of what Mizushima had just told me. Her words still rang in my ears.

Me? Get along...with Majima? If Mizushima was actually satisfied with her circumstances, then there was no reason for me to be hostile toward Majima.

Furthermore, I needed to reconsider my stance on Majima Takahiro. What kind of man was he, exactly? The way he staked his life to protect what was dear to him was praiseworthy. His resolute

expression when he came to ask me to fight Takaya by his side was still burned into my mind. His serious personality was something I actually favored, and just maybe, parts of him reminded me of my strict dad.

However, at the same time, the thought of getting along with Majima made me terribly tense. I didn't know why, exactly... I didn't...but maybe that was natural. Either way, he'd said so many harsh things to me. I'd also said a whole lot to him. He'd openly told me that he hated me, anyway. And he'd called me a dumbass...twice.

I suddenly felt angrier than before and frowned.

"What's up?" Majima asked curiously.

"Nothing."

"What's got you so pissed?"

I glared at Majima as he made a face like I wasn't making any sense.

"I just happen to hate you too," I said.

"That came out of nowhere..."

I walked by Majima as he grumbled. I pretended not to notice Lily's know-it-all smile, dragging my injured leg and leaving them behind.

I doubt I'll ever get along with Majima.

Actually, it's impossible.

It definitely won't happen.

Like hell I'll let it happen.

Who's the dumbass here?

I hate him too.

What a hateful guy.

I hate him!

That was how I felt about Majima Takahiro. As such, I never wanted him to look down on me and call me a dumbass again.

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Minto Figure

Illustrator
Napo

6

Monster Tamer





"Hey!
Quit
ogling
me!"

KATOU MANA

1ST YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

IINO YUNA

2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

ROSE

MAGICAL PUPPET



"Lily..."

"Wh- Wh- Wha-?!"



LILY
MIMIC SLIME













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Monster Tamer: Volume 6
by Minto Higure

Translated by Hikoki
Edited by Suzanne Seals

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Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

This English edition is published by arrangement with Futabasha Publishers Ltd., Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2021